THE REALM OF *MIMESIS* IN PLATO

Orality, Writing, and the Ontology of the Image

Mariangela Esposito

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This tablet shouts aloud
terrible, dreadful words.
Where can I run to, where
can I escape this crushing weight, this pain?
I'm dead. I am destroyed.
This song, the writing's voice
is venom to my eyes.

EURIPIDES, *Hippolytus* (vv. 971–977)

Contents

Abstract

Plato lived at the cusp of an anthropological paradigm shift, very similar to the one we have been experiencing for a few decades. As we experience the progressive erosion of literacy in favour of digitalisation, Plato's dialogues witness the transition from orality to literacy, both with their contents and with their literary style. Located in the blind spot of this transition, the dialogues are living contradictions: they are written dialogues, partly literary, partly oral; this contradiction informs also one of the most vexed issues of the history of Platonic interpretation, the relationship between orality and writing in the dialogues.

This monograph is a contemporary philosophical inquiry into the complex issue of the relationship between Plato's respective criticisms of orality and writing. The main aim of this study is to argue that this relationship, often read as a straightforward opposition, is instead grounded in a more ontological level of analysis, as is exemplified by the ontology of the image which appears throughout the entire Platonic canon. An analysis of the structure of this ontology will show that both Plato's criticism of orality and the criticism of writing are inessential, and in fact have more points of convergence than divergence. The theme of *mimesis* is the central thread of this work, which I treat as the "mechanism" that progressively reveals the continuity and co-dependency of the orality/writing opposition and the ontology of the image (itself based on the co-dependency between *eidos* and *eidolon*).

The work offers an open-ended conclusion that suggests the possibility of further inquiry into the Platonic conception of beauty: the various occurrences of beauty in Plato's works demonstrate a singular relationship between *eidos* and *eidolon* which overcomes the mimetic mechanism and points to an *erotic* conception of life and philosophy.

The afterword, which closes the work, aims to show the relevance of this study to a broader understanding of some of the contemporary phenomena which challenge our ways of analysing, communicating, and elaborating on the visual world into which we have anthropologically shifted.

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Premises

This study aims to analyse some of the elements of a broad and complex issue in the contemporary interpretation of Plato's philosophical heritage. In general terms, this issue may be referred to as the debate around the relationship between orality and writing in Plato's philosophy.

The volume of approaches and perspectives that coexist within this debate, means it is not possible to include a significant proportion of its contributions in the discussion which follows – a familiar challenge for scholars of Plato, whose philosophy has represented such a significant milestone in the development of western philosophical consciousness. This is not to say that the significance of these interpretations is underestimated; rather, it is an acknowledgement of the scope of the issue and the need to draw precise limits around the material to be studied. In some ways, those topics which are excluded may be considered as revealing as those addressed.

The aim of this work is not to trace the history and nature of contemporary approaches to the issue of orality/writing in Plato's work, nor is it to assert the supremacy of one interpretative paradigm over others – both approaches that have already been widely employed by other contemporary studies. Moreover, this monograph is grounded in the firm belief that reading Plato's works against a single interpretative paradigm is a methodological choice which not only narrows one's comprehension of the original texts, but also ignores the multi-layered nature of Platonic writing. For this reason, it is preferable to connect, integrate, and contrast different contemporary paradigms, so as to draw out the strengths and limitations of competing hermeneutical approaches to the Platonic corpus.

This investigation into the field of orality/writing originally arose out of an inquiry into the value of poetry and the role of beauty in some of Plato's works: here the orality/writing issue revealed itself to be propaedeutic to a correct understanding of the Platonic presentation of poetry, and to be connected to the ontology of the image. The aesthetic lens is thus the main filter through which the relationship between orality and writing is to be discussed, but it is not the exclusive focus of this study.

It is nevertheless somewhat inappropriate to talk about aesthetics with regard to Plato's philosophy. As a young discipline which developed out of modern philosophy, with the first reference to "aesthetics" appearing as an independent philosophical category in the mid-eighteenth century,[1] it is therefore

1 Conventionally, the first time that the word "Aesthetic" was used to mean a philosophical reflection upon the arts, the Beautiful, and Taste, was in Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*

necessary to acknowledge the anachronism inherent in any discussion of "Platonic aesthetics." Even if this does not strictly prevent the application of an aesthetic reading to Plato's philosophy, this remains an operation which must nevertheless be performed carefully. Indeed, Plato does, in fact, deal with themes which pertain to the study of Aesthetics – such as beauty and the arts – with the result that anyone who now studies these themes will inevitably find their research labelled as "aesthetics," despite the lack of existence of any such discipline in Plato's day. The field of "Platonic aesthetics" is thus faced with an inherent hermeneutical dilemma.

In order to circumvent this interpretative problem, we must trace at least two hermeneutic boundaries around the application of the modern label "aesthetics" in relation to Platonic philosophy. First, there is no specific, autonomous reflection on the arts or beauty in Plato's work; rather, reflections on these topics are always interwoven with other themes and are generally part of wider discussions on typically Platonic issues such as education, politics, and psychology.[2] Second, our contemporary sensibilities around beauty and the arts do not straightforwardly align with the Platonic perspective, given the conceptual and semantic differences between a contemporary and ancient Greek perspective: for the Greeks, the "arts" (*technai*) were based on skills and techniques which were related to specific social contexts,[3] while the term "beauty" (*kalon*) was linked to ideals of proportion and harmony;[4] Plato in particular, did not place significant value on art and artists – choosing to banish them from his ideal city[5] – and aligned the concept of beauty more closely

(1758). Immanuel Kant subsequently denounced this specific use of the term by Baumgarten in his second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787). In this work, Kant himself used the term in a different way, relating it to its etymological meaning (from Ancient Greek, *aisthesis*: sensation, sensorial perception). Kant writes: "The Germans are the only people who currently make use of the word 'aesthetic' in order to signify what others call the critique of taste. This usage originated in the abortive attempt made by Baumgarten, that admirable analytic thinker, to bring the critical treatment of the beautiful under rational principles, and so to raise its rules to the rank of a science. But such endeavours are fruitless. The said rules or criteria are, as regards their chief sources, merely empirical, and consequently can never serve as determinate a way by which our judgment of taste must be directed" (Kant, 1998, p. 173, footnote A21/B35–36).

For contemporary use of the ancient terms "Aesthetics" and "Beauty" (*kalon*), cf. also the introduction to the *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, "Aesthetics Today" (Kivy, 2004, pp. 1–11); and Hyland, 2008, pp. 3–5.

2 The use of the term "psychology" in Plato cannot be associated with the contemporary discipline that deals with human mind and behaviours. This term has instead to be taken in its etymologic sense: "structure" of the soul.

3 On the meaning of the term *techne* in Ancient Greece, cf. Roochnick, 1996, pp. 20–21; on the use of the term in Plato's works, cf. ibid., pp. 89–177.

4 Konstan, 2014, pp. 101–131.

5 *Republic* 607b.

with the idea of the Good than with aesthetic pleasure. Some of these issues are explored in more clarity and depth in the second chapter.

Finally, it also should be stressed that, given the inexhaustible nature of Plato's philosophy, the central challenge of this work lies in respecting its scope. It is for this reason that the favoured approach of this study is a cautious and attentive reading of the platonic texts that avoids the application of hermeneutic keys which, although they would most likely fit, would inevitably constrain the fluid and indefinite nature of Plato's written works. Several contemporary philosophers and interpretative paradigms are called upon to enhance the discussion where relevant, but there is no intention to privilege any particular reading. At the same time, it is not possible to involve all of them.

A purely philological approach has not been considered due to a lack of advanced expertise in this specific field, and the possibility of its limiting the original aim of the research. Nevertheless, a personal reading of the original Greek text takes priority over any contemporary philosophical interpretation.

The most relevant Greek terms that are of particular importance to this study are quoted in Ancient Greek, transliterated, and italicised. This decision reflects not only the difficulty of adequately translating these terms, but also the plurality and lack of semantic precision of the ancient concepts which they represent. As previously indicated, there exists not only a significant time gap between ancient and contemporaneous viewpoints, but also a deep cultural gap expressed in the evolution of language and its determinacy. By citing these terms in the original Greek, this study aims to respect these differences, as well as to restore the richness of the "undefinition" intrinsic to the terms themselves. Among those terms left in Greek is the word *mimesis*, a term which also exists in English, but which is nevertheless italicised throughout this manuscript to highlight its original Ancient Greek meaning. Originally related to the sphere of poetic composition and performance (from archaic poetry to classical theatre), in English *mimesis* primarily means "imitation," whilst the Ancient Greek term instead signifies "representation." Technically, a representation of a model through its reproduction (although this representation is never identical to the model), the main feature of mimetic reproduction is that its representation is visible.[6]

Throughout this work, the representation of the reproduced model is primarily described as the "mimetic mechanism," where the use of the term "mechanism" aims to underline the constant relationship between reproduction and representation, which signifies the presence of a mechanism of reproduction behind any representation, and hence a constant reference to the original model.

6 Palumbo, 2008, p. 11, n. 7.

The relevant Platonic texts are quoted from the Oxford versions edited by John Burnet, while the numbering system and the abbreviation of the dialogues' titles follow the standard layout originally introduced by Henricus Stephanus in the late sixteenth century. Translation from Ancient Greek follows the edition of the complete works of Plato edited by John Cooper, in 1997. The identity of the translator for each dialogue is specified at the first occurrence of a quotation from the translated dialogue itself.

Introduction

The relationship between orality and writing appears problematic in Plato's work, not only as a binary comparison, but as a twofold problem in which each aspect is itself contradictory. Plato's criticism of the oral tradition as a means of transmitting knowledge is balanced against his clear assertion that writing is also an inadequate means of transmitting knowledge – a double criticism which, since both elements are in opposition, produces a vicious circle in which each element refers back to the other. This circular dichotomy is exacerbated by the fact that Plato himself was a writer, though not in the conventional philosophical sense: he wrote neither philosophical treatises nor doctrines – as he declared he would never do[1] – but dialogues, thirty-four of which, together with one monologue (*Apology*) and few letters,[2] make up the Platonic canon. His philosophical insights are therefore to be found in written dialogues which resemble oral exchange – in his very method of philosophical exposition, the mutual reference of orality to writing, and of writing to orality, is apparent.

One may argue that the critique of writing, which appears primarily in the *Phaedrus*,[3] should be ascribed to the main protagonist of the dialogues, Socrates, especially given the fact that the historical Socrates did not leave behind any writings, and firmly believed in the practice of philosophy through oral dialogue. Nevertheless, this interpretation is not able to negate the inherent contradiction in the Platonic philosophical method – first because it is an ambitious and almost impossible task to accurately distinguish between the Platonic and Socratic elements of Plato's works (a task which is not attempted here); second because, even if it were possible to assert that the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* is genuinely Socratic, it remains to be seen how one would interpret Plato's statement in the autobiographical *Seventh Letter* that he would never leave behind any writings about his philosophy. In a similar vein, to whom should we ascribe the critiques of orality presented in the *Ion* and *Republic*? The paradox is thus: if the critique is ascribed to Plato, it would clash with his biographical statement; if ascribed to Socrates, it clashes with the *Phaedrus*. The contradiction between orality and writing would then start over again.

1 *VII Epistula* 344c.

2 This is the canon as established by Thrasyllus, the first-century grammarian and philosopher from Alexandria, who organised Plato's works into nine (non-chronological) tetralogies.

3 *Phaedrus* 274b–278d.

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Some contemporary scholars, in an attempt to pass over this opposition between orality and writing, have minimised the relevance of one of the two sides. Within this debate, the critique of writing is better argued and better supported evidentially than the circumscribed critique of orality, which attempts not to deny the role of the written dialogues, but simply to relegate them in favour of oral transmission which is privileged as a means of expressing philosophical truths to a small, select audience.[4] On the other side, certain alternative contemporary scholars have attempted to minimise the critique of writing, or at least viewed it as a mere brief backlash against the introduction of writing as an innovative new technology for transmitting knowledge.[5] In a culture based on oral transmission, as was the case in Greece between the eighth and the fifth centuries BCE, the use of writing to transmit knowledge was initially seen as something that would weaken memory; ultimately, however, it gradually replaced oral transmission, and thereby made it possible to develop philosophy in a more systematic way.

It is evident here that posing the issue in terms of a simple polarity strengthens the contradiction to the point that it becomes unresolvable.[6] Similarly, taking the approach of simply minimising one side of the opposition does an injustice to the dialogues by presenting a reading which is both partial and sterile: Plato enumerates the contradiction, and so it must be considered seriously in all its forms. For this reason, the methodological approach chosen for this study aims to posit a new means to overcome this contradiction – namely by finding the essential points of contact between the two poles. Following this strategy, it becomes evident that the two critiques are simply different elements of a single critique, which is therefore able to explain why each side consistently refers to the other. From this, it subsequently emerges that the true opposition may be located not simply between orality and writing, but rather between deceptive speeches (historically performed by poets and sophists) and true discourse (the speciality of the philosopher), which are present both in oral and written transmission.

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4 This kind of interpretation was proposed as a “new paradigm” by the Tübingen-Milan School, cf. Reale 2010. More details about this interpretation are discussed in sections 1.4 and 1.5 of this work.

5 Cf. for example the interpretation of the Harvard School whose main representative is Eric Havelock. More details about this interpretation are discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2 of this work.

6 Ruth Finnegan has shown that posing the issue of “orality/writing” in terms of a polarity is useful only as a strategy to define the features of the two poles. This polarisation would not, however, reflect the real uses of these media which are usually mixed together in most human cultures, as Goody (1968) has documented. Cf. Finnegan, 1988, pp. 139–174.

This interpretation is largely based on the well-established Platonic condemnation of the arts, especially of poetry,[7] as something deceptive that corrupts the soul. The opposition to sophistic rhetoric is addressed only partially in this work (in the hope of pursuing it in more depth at a later date), but is an opposition between poetry and philosophy that brings us to the consolidated paradigm of the image (*eidos-eidolon*), which occurs frequently in Plato's dialogues. The critique of the arts, in general terms, is based on the assumption that they produce multiple, false, sensorial images (*eidola*) that are far removed from the truth, while the truth is a process through which multiplicities are gathered together into an intellectual unity (*eidos*).

It is neither the purview nor intention of this study to reassess the classic dichotomy of sense and intellect in Plato's philosophy, and to avoid doing so, this study instead offers an open-ended conclusion in which it is shown that there is, in Plato's works, a unique "event" that overcomes some effective but simplistic distinctions between sense and intellect, *eidos* and *eidolon*, and between orality and writing. This event is beauty. The most powerful concept in Plato's works, as it shines forth suddenly, beauty is unique because, through its perception, it is possible to be led to its eidetic nature which is almost synonymous with the idea of the Good. It is this capacity to elevate the soul that makes it the most extraordinary event in the dialogues.

This work is divided into three chapters. The first and second of these are devoted to the respective critiques of writing and orality in Plato's works, along with the reception of these critiques by contemporary scholars who have taken the approach of privileging one aspect of the dichotomy over the other. The third chapter then attempts a resolution of this opposition through a comparison with the paradigm of the image (that is, the ontology of the image, a concept which will later be clarified), ultimately offering an "open-ended" conclusion. While the final part of the work focuses on the theme of beauty and its relevance, the impact of the theme of beauty, and its connected theory, the theory of the immortality of the soul, on Plato's late dialogues are not discussed here. These topics nevertheless represent possible further avenues of investigation based on the foundations laid throughout this monograph. The final afterword to this work aims to show, for instance, the relevance of such an investigation for understanding some of the phenomena which present the greatest challenges to our contemporary ways of communicating, as well as to establishing a philosophical framework for further inquiries.

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7 *Republic* 595–608.

The thread which is interwoven throughout the entire work is *mimesis*. This central theme is initially introduced contextually – in the first chapter, *mimesis* is considered mainly for its epistemological value; in the second, it appears as a psychological (and hence political) threat – but is ultimately analysed ontologically, where, in the final chapter of the work, it is unrooted and ontologically displayed.

CHAPTER 1

The Critique of Writing in Plato's Works

The Platonic critique of writing is conventionally located in two distinct settings in Plato's works: towards the end of the *Phaedrus*, when Socrates discusses the myth of Theuth, and in a few lines of the autobiographical *Seventh Letter*. The first two sections of this chapter aim to analyse both of these passages respectively (with the first section focused on the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*; the second on the critique of writing in the *Seventh Letter*).

Here, excerpts are quoted from both Plato's works, so as to offer an interpretation that is as coherent as possible with the original text, and from discussions of those contemporary authors who have discussed the relevant passages. These integrated excerpts are introduced primarily to support and explain some of the issues that are dealt with here, but also occasionally to challenge their traditional interpretation.

The contemporary author referred to most often in the first section is Jacques Derrida, whose deconstructive reading of the *Phaedrus* emphasises both the complexity of the critique of writing, as well as a need for unity in interpreting the themes of the dialogue as a whole. By contrast, the second chapter focuses primarily on the remarks of contemporary author Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose epistemological reading of the *Seventh Letter* attempts to steer away from the medium chosen to transmit knowledge as the central concept at issue, and instead to foreground a focus on the transmission of knowledge itself as the central problem. Indeed, one of the most relevant aspects emphasised by Gadamer's reading of the *Seventh Letter* is the weakness of human *logoi* (words/speeches), which is a central theme throughout this work. It is here that the leading theme of this study, *mimesis*, also makes its first appearance, which sets out the basis for further analyses.

The third and fourth sections of this chapter enumerate the main traits of the established contemporary position on Plato's criticism of writing. This is a position represented by the Tübingen-Milan school, composed of German and Italian scholars active in academia between the 1980s and 1990s, whose claims, propounded by philological and philosophical arguments, together posit the thesis that Plato offers a firm rejection of writing in favour of an exclusive, oral transmission of higher knowledge. Although the theories elaborated by the Tübingen-Milan school present compelling arguments, this work rejects these claims on the basis of counterarguments present in the dialogues themselves, as well as in the responses of some of the most distinguished contemporary Platonic interpreters.

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Having enumerated the reasons this study has to reject the theses of the Tübingen-Milan school, the last section of this chapter posits, in general terms, an interpretation of Plato's criticism of writing that is both more consistent with the dialogues, and functional to the development of the main themes of this work.

The titles given to each of these sections in this first chapter are brief quotations chosen from both the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*. This choice is primarily due to the figurative eloquence of the quotations themselves, however, it is also intended to stress one of the typically ironic contradictions manifested in the Platonic criticism of writing: it is a criticism of writing elaborated in writing.

1 "I Have Discovered a Potion for Memory and for Wisdom"[1]

The passage of the *Phaedrus* in which the critique of writing is articulated has often been presented as an unnecessary appendix that makes the dialogue appear still more unorganised and fragmentary than it is already held to be,[2] a reading which, it must be acknowledged, would make the passage highly ironic: Socrates shows his mastery in the theory and practice of composing well-structured discourses throughout the dialogue by criticising a speech composed by the rhetorician Lysias on the basis that it is composed of parts which *appear to have been thrown together at random*.[3]

Why would Plato make the character of Socrates criticise a deficiency in Lysias' speech that manifests in his own dialogue? It cannot be as simple as assuming that Plato is unaware of the rules of composing systematic discourse, and yet, it is impossible to deny the fragmentary structure of *Phaedrus*. In light of this striking contradiction, this section therefore posits an alternative reason to believe that the "trial of writing" is in fact a relevant, intentional, and nonetheless complementary part of the dialogue.

On these grounds, it is worth recalling a few lines of one of the most established contemporary interpretations of the *Phaedrus*, that of Jacques Derrida:

> Tout cette instruction du *procès de l'écriture* devra bien cesser d'apparaître un jour comme une fantaisie mythologique surajoutée, un appendice

1 *Phaedr.* 274e. Translated by Nehamas and Woodruff, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

2 In regard to the main theories about the composition and chronology of the *Phaedrus*, cf. Robin, 1908, pp. 63–120; Brandwood, 1992; Kahn, 1998, pp. 42–48; Thesleff, 1989.

3 *Phaedr.* 264b.

> dont l'organisme du dialogue aurait bien pu se passer sans dommage. En vérité, elle est rigoureusement appelée d'un bout à l'autre du Phèdre.[4]

The relevance of this observation is that it offers grounds for establishing a relationship of mutual interdependence between the final appendix, which contains the trial of writing, and the more systematic remainder of the dialogue. This not only reintroduces the trial of writing as a complementary part of the work, but, crucially, asserts that it is not possible to fully understand the trial without its being integrated with the rest of the dialogue – indeed, some evidence for this interpretation appears immediately after Socrates' critique of randomness in Lysias' speech, where he explains that a well-composed speech is like a *living body*: that is to say, it is a harmonised whole.[5] On the grounds that Socrates appears to be well aware of how a proper speech ought to be structured, the suggestion that the trial of writing is a mere avoidable appendix must, therefore, be excluded. Rather than dismissing the trial, it is therefore necessary to try to understand precisely how it relates to the dialogue.

As an interpreter of the *Phaedrus*, Derrida uses an alternative metaphor to advocate for the same necessity of the unity of the "appendix" to the dialogue. In place of the comparison of the harmony of the body's parts, Derrida talks instead about a *symploke*[6] (weaving), where the trial of writing stands as a thread interwoven throughout the fabric of the entire text.

Indeed, it is possible to argue that there is no single main theme presented in the dialogue, but rather multiple themes around which further sub-themes are developed. Each theme is thus dependent on the others, a structure which is only successful if all the themes of the dialogue are interpreted in connection with one another. A valid hermeneutical approach for the interpreter who reads the dialogue attentively, this understanding of the text works to indicate how Derrida's metaphor functions – i.e., how the individual threads of the fabric are bound together in the finished product, which is the complete dialogue. From the perspective of its composer (Plato), the organic unity of the creation

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4 Derrida, 1968, p. 261. English ed. 1981, p. 67: "That entire hearing of the trial of writing should some day cease to appear as an extraneous mythological fantasy, an appendix the organism could easily, with no loss, have done without. In truth, it is rigorously called for from one end of the *Phaedrus* to the other."

5 "Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work." (*Phaedr*. 264c).

6 Derrida, 1981, p. 67. Even if in the *Phaedrus* Plato does not use explicitly the term *symploke*, this is nonetheless a recurrent term in Plato's other dialogues. Derrida refers specifically to a passage from the *Statesman* (*Politicus* 277–278).

is thus guaranteed by an underlying movement of division into parts and, subsequently, reunification into an ideal unity.[7] This therefore demands that there be a common direction in the structure and development of the themes – or, metaphorically, that the weaver must know, not only his technique, but also the colours, shape, and purpose of the fabric under creation. Given the many links between the discovery of writing and *eros*, *maniai*, *rhetorike*, the destiny of souls, *paideia*, and *psychagogia* – to name some of the other main themes of the *Phaedrus* – such an understanding of the structure of the dialogue would be consistent with the presentation of its contents.

The Socratic metaphor, on the other hand, is more focused on the perspective of the composer, and yet there is an implicit understanding in this metaphor of a well-structured speech being a harmonised unity in the same way as the different parts of a living body are harmonised. Indeed, probably the most important point of this metaphor is that Socrates is talking about a *living* body: the element that gives unity to this body cannot be the body itself – this would be circular reasoning – but must be the breath of life in the body, that is, the *psyche* (soul). It might therefore be deduced that speeches, as well as human bodies, have souls that guarantee harmonised unity – the liveliness of speeches and their capability to respond is what makes them authentically philosophical. This assertion may sound vague at this stage, but will become clearer towards the end of this work with the progressive examination of other aspects of Plato's criticism.

Based on these preliminary evaluations, this chapter will argue that the single "thread" of the trial of writing is fundamental to the unity of the overall "fabric" of the dialogue, and that the two must therefore be read in connection. Indeed, when the section of the *Phaedrus* in which the myth of the discovery of writing is laid out, namely the myth of Theuth, is read from a unifying perspective, it is possible to shed new light on both the trial and the remainder of the dialogue itself.

Towards the end of the dialogue, Socrates recounts to Phaedrus the supposedly well-known myth that attributes the discovery of writing to the

7 This is an allusion to the dialectical movement of *diairesis* (division) and *synagoge* (collection) that is constantly recalled in the dialogue. To quote just one explicative passage: "Well, Phaedrus, I am myself a lover of these divisions and collections, so that I may be able to think and to speak and if I believe that someone else is capable of discerning a single thing that is also by nature capable of encompassing many, I follow 'straight behind, in his tracks, as if he were a god.' God knows whether this is the right name for those who can do this correctly or not, but so far I have always called them 'dialecticians.'" (*Phaedr.* 266b–c).

Egyptian *daimon* Theuth.[8] Here Socrates claims that he heard the Egyptian myth from someone else who had heard it from the ancients who held it as truth; as such, the myth lacks a reliable epistemic source, but its value as truth is nevertheless undiminished. Plato, in emphasising that the myth does not have a verifiable source, does not claim that Socrates must blindly be trusted, nor that he is giving a preeminent role to the oral transmission of myths – rather, he is offering an interpretative key that is a *leitmotif* of the whole dialogue: it is possible to use and rely on any source if there is a constant awareness that what matters is neither the source itself nor the plot of the myth, but the capability of giving a right account of it. It is for this reason – i.e., to justify and convince Phaedrus about this way of using myths[9] – that Socrates then recalls a further myth following the exposition of Theuth's story:

> But, my friend, the priests of the temple of Zeus at Dodona say that the first prophecies were the words of an oak. Everyone who lived at that time, not being as wise as you young ones are today, found it rewarding enough in their simplicity to listen to an oak or even a stone, so long as it was telling the truth, while it seems to make a difference to you, Phaedrus, who is speaking and where he comes from. Why, though, don't you just consider whether what he says is right or wrong? (*Phaedr*. 275b–c)

The effect of following up on the myth of Theuth is that the Platonic reader is warned that a literal reading is not worthwhile.[10]

Another interpretative element that must be called into question at this juncture, is the role of opinion (*doxa*) in the process of gaining knowledge. If human beings were able to straightforwardly access truth, they would no longer have any interest in the opinions of other human beings,[11] which would

8 It is not possible to explain why an Egyptian myth is preferred to the Greek version, i.e., the myth of Prometheus as the inventor and propagator of writing among mortals. Cf. Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Theuth also appears again in Plato's dialogues, cf. *Phil.* 18b.

9 Phaedrus seems to suspect that Socrates is inventing the myth of Theuth: "Socrates, you're very good at making up stories from Egypt or wherever else you want!" (*Phaedr*. 275b).

10 This warning is actually quite similar to the one at the very beginning of the dialogue: when Socrates is talking to Phaedrus about the myth of Boreas, he makes a distinction between intellectuals who waste their time trying to rationalise the myths, and himself who accepts the myths as traditionally told. In fact, Socrates seems to be primarily concerned with knowing himself rather than criticising and dissecting the myths (*Phaedr*. 229c–230a). Cf. Griswold, 1996.

11 *Phaedr.* 374b.

have ceased to be necessary for any quest for truth. As truth is not as straightforward as this, human beings are forced to trust ancient opinions and myths, even if it is impossible to verify their sources. Trust in any sort of account (opinions, myths, stories, metaphors, etc.) is thus a preliminary requirement in the quest for truth, but, as Socrates argues, blind trust in *logoi* (discourses) is insufficient: employment of the dialectical method[12] is essential for illuminating the correct path towards knowledge. What Plato therefore appears to be suggesting here, is that we rely on opinions and myths referred to by Socrates who in turn is playing the role of a rhetorician by tailoring his speech to fit perfectly with Phaedrus' soul on this particular occasion.[13]

One of the many interesting aspects of this short myth told by Socrates is that its plot is presented as a dialogue within a dialogue – a frequent occurrence within the Platonic corpus. Plato's reasoning here was most probably that, in order to reach the core of the myth, it would not suffice to simply have Socrates talk about Theuth's discoveries and their propagation among human beings; only the dialectical expedient of representing a myth through "a dialogue within the dialogue" would be able to successfully display – by way of contrast – determinant dualisms such as medicine/poison, remembering/reminding, opinion/wisdom, and appearance/reality.

The dialogue expounded in the myth is a brief exchange between Theuth and Thamus, the Egyptian king. Theuth goes to visit Thamus at his court to show him seven *technai* (arts/techniques): number, calculation, geometry, astronomy, the game of chess, the game of dice and, above all, writing, which he himself had discovered, and which he believed that all Egyptians should learn. Thamus therefore inquires as to the use of each specific art or technique, then the *daimon* and the king discuss the *technai* for an extended period, wherein Thamus evaluates each discovery. Socrates skips the discussion of all of the *technai*, which would require too much time to cover, and focuses purely on the technique of writing, which is the dialogue presented between Theuth – who claims that writing will both make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory, comparing his invention to *a potion* [*pharmakon*] *for memory*

12 Cf. note 7.

13 "Since the nature of speech is in fact to direct the soul, whoever intends to be a rhetorician must know how many kinds of soul there are. Their number is so-and-so many; each is of such-and-such a sort; hence some people have such-and-such a character and others have such-and such. Those distinctions established, there are, in turn, so-and-so many kinds of speech, each of such-and-such a sort. People of such-and-such a character are easy to persuade by speeches of such-and-such a sort in connection with such-and-such an issue for this particular reason, while people of such-and-such another sort are difficult to persuade for those particular reasons." (*Phaedr*. 271d).

and for wisdom[14] – and Thamus, who believes that Theuth, being the affectionate "father" of writing, cannot be objective in judging his "son," and is therefore excessively generous in his praise. Thamus considers writing thus:

> It will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will be wise only about opinions instead of really being wise. (*Phaedr*. 275a–b)

The dialectical *agon* between Theuth and Thamus is played out primarily on the subject of memory. On the one hand, Theuth believes that writing is a healing medicine (*pharmakon*)[15] which, in improving the memory of its proponents, therefore also enhances their wisdom; Thamus, on the other hand, claims that writing is a dangerous poison (*pharmakon*) which weakens memory, although it may have value in the capacity of an *aide-mémoire*.

The Platonic reader eventually comes to agree with the objections of the wise king, but there remains something relevant in Theuth's perspective that is worth noting: in his statements about writing, Thamus seems to over-interpret the value that Theuth attributes to his invention; furthermore, the myth concludes with Thamus' objections, meaning we are not able to see how Theuth would have defended his "son." Thamus argues as if writing were merely a mnemonic device, however, this criticism does not really apply to writing in its essence, especially given that the oral tradition already had many mnemonic devices and techniques. What Thamus' objections appear to miss, therefore, is the originality of Theuth's invention – i.e., that it can improve the ability

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14 *Phaedr.* 274e.

15 The Greek word *pharmakon*, which is a *vox media* (meaning at the same time medicine and poison), recurs often in the dialogue: starting from the allegory in the myth of Boreas (229c), progressing to the metaphor of being convinced of going out of the city (229d), and ending up as the constant reminding in the myth of Theuth. Cf. also Derrida, 1981, pp. 65–75 and pp. 95–117.

to memorise and (hence) it can make the Egyptians wiser. The value of the invention is not that it may be used in place of other forms of transmitting knowledge, but that it can help people to remember a greater quantity of information, and consequently, to know more. Thamus appears to miss this point by imagining an extreme situation in which writing replaces all other forms of the transmission of knowledge, and wisdom thus moves from the valuable inside of the soul to the ephemeral exteriority of written records.

At stake here is not solely an opposition between reminding (*hypomnemis*) and remembering (*mneme*), but also an opposition between two ways of understanding wisdom: Theuth's view of wisdom is that the more you can remember, the wiser you are; for Thamus, the deeper you can remember, the more valuable your wisdom is. Thus *pharmakon* (potion), *mneme* (memory), and *sophia* (wisdom) all have different connotations depending on whether they are considered from Theuth's or Thamus' perspective.

As already demonstrated, Thamus' critique over-interprets Theuth's invention and leads to an extreme situation whereby writing becomes a privileged means of transmitting knowledge. This is a direct product of the context of the dialogue in which the myth is presented, which requires that Thamus be drastic in order to reveal the boundaries of the new discovery, given his formal responsibilities of explanation to the Egyptians. If Theuth is simply a clever inventor who wishes to persuade Thamus of the advantages of his discovery, Thamus appears conscious that those advantages hide many dangers beyond merely the technique of writing – in fact, through Thamus' words it is possible to discern not only a concern for the weakening of memory and knowledge, but also an implicit and bitter acknowledgement that, once discovered, the technique of writing would develop without pause – as is precisely what actually occurred.[16] Thamus seems to understand that a technique is never innocent in itself: it is more than just a vehicle for content. In fact, any new technology, while promising many improvements, also contains side effects, in the same way as a medicine (*pharmakon*).

This acknowledgement should sound rather familiar nowadays: the constant invention and upgrading of new technologies improve human skills on the one hand, but at the same time modify the way we relate to each other, the way we communicate, the way we interpret the world, and thus the way we think.[17]

16 Ruth Finnegan discusses the related idea that a new media, once adopted, drives out old-established ones. She refers mainly to the polarity "orality/literacy." Cf. Finnegan, 1988, pp. 142–143.

17 For further evaluations on these themes cf. Gunkel, Marcondes Filho, and Mersch, 2016.

On the basis of this myth, Socrates and Phaedrus carry out their own evaluations of writing, following which Phaedrus eventually agrees with Socrates' criticisms. In order to define the epistemological and psychological drawbacks of writing, Socrates associates the technique with the realm of *mimesis*, specifically, the art of painting,[18] and, a few paragraphs later, with the function of rhythmic verses in the art of rhapsody.[19] The comparison runs thus: first, written words as well as painted images stand silently in front of us and, if questioned, are not able to answer; if a written speech is criticised, it is not able to defend itself, and instead always requires help from "its father" (the composer of the speech) who must defend it on its behalf. Second, like rhythmic verses, written discourses cannot be taken seriously – as evidence of this, Socrates points to the purpose of rhapsodic performances, which are merely for the sake of persuasion – they are unable to teach anything because they are composed without discernment.

Socrates' main criticism of writing thus appears clearer after these two comparisons: both painting and rhapsody are mere tools to prompt memory; they are not alive, not responsible, and, most importantly of all, they are not fertile, as the connected metaphor of the seeds points out.[20] The only valuable kind of speech, Socrates asserts, is the fertile one, i.e., the speech that is able to impress upon the soul what is right, beautiful, and good.[21] This is the conception of speech that is used as the comparative model in Socrates' criticism of writing.

These most recent arguments aim to further underline the negative aspects of writing, but, beyond this, it is also interesting to note their recurrent and unfavourable association with painting and poetry, especially when it comes to themes of education and care of the soul. At this stage, it will suffice to mention the main features of the well-known critique of arts in the *Republic*,[22] as well as the critique of rhapsody in the *Ion*,[23] which are analysed further in the next chapter.

Both the critique of painting and the critique of poetry are linked by the concept of *mimesis*.[24] A multifaceted concept in Plato's works, *mimesis* may be evaluated from various philosophical perspectives – epistemologically,

18 *Phaedr.* 275d–e.

19 *Phaedr.* 277e–278b.

20 *Phaedr.* 276b.

21 *Phaedr.* 278b.

22 *Resp.* 373b–c; 377b–e; 603b ff.

23 Cf. *Ion* 535a–b.

24 On the use of this term in Plato's *Republic*, cf. Havelock, 1963, pp. 20–35; on the history of the term from Plato to Gadamer, cf. Sallis, 2015; on the complete history of the term in the field of aesthetics from Plato to modernity, cf. Halliwell, 2002.

educatively, psychologically, or compositionally – all of which are considered in Plato's critique, but what is of primary significance is the mechanism behind it – i.e., that an imitative reproduction of an original model is always implied. This model is only an "original" model once *mimesis* comes into play to produce something that looks like it, but is in fact a mere copy.

Three determining features in this intuitive mechanism must be underlined:

First, *mimesis* is presented as an imitative reproduction which is strictly connected to the ontology of the image, something which is immediately evident from Plato's semantic choices when describing the issue.[25] Here he insists that the copy has to *look like*, or else has to resemble, the shape of the original: it may be an image, the movement of an actor, or the explication of a concept, but it must have a visual shape. The terms used to talk about the things reproduced by *mimesis* thus refer mainly to the semantic area of appearance.

Second, *mimesis* does not produce, but *reproduces.* Whatever emerges from the mimetic mechanism is dependent on an original model, and cannot exist, but as a derivation of the original. This is one of the primary drawbacks of writing according to Socrates: written speeches, like visual images, cannot independently respond, and therefore require that someone looks after them.

Third, an evaluative aspect introduced by Plato is that the copy which emerges from mimetic reproduction is false, while the original is true. In addition to this, each stage of reproduction augments the distance from the original and true model, thereby exacerbating its deceptive effects.

To understand this final point, we may refer to the example of the bed and the table from the *Republic*.[26] At this point, it will suffice to recall only the introductory element of this example, which is the analogy of the mirror,[27] a brief analogy which exemplifies the three features just discussed:

> SOCRATES: Tell me, do you think that there's no way any craftsman could make all these things, or that in one way he could and in another he couldn't? Don't you see that there is a way in which you yourself could make all of them?
>
> GLAUCON: What way is that?

25 To talk about the relationship between the model and its copy, Plato uses terms related to vision. The main conceptual couple referred to in this work is *eidos-eidolon*, which is analysed in detail in the third chapter.

26 *Resp.* 596b.

27 For an accurate interpretation of this analogy cf. Halliwell in Denham, 2012, pp. 173–204.

SOCRATES: It isn't hard: you could do it quickly and in lots of places, especially if you were willing to carry a mirror with you, for that's the quickest way of all. With it you can quickly make the sun, the things in the heavens, the earth, yourself, the other animals, manufactured items, plants, and everything else mentioned just now.

GLAUCON: Yes, I could make them appear, but I couldn't make the things themselves as they truly are.

SOCRATES: Well put! You've extracted the point that's crucial to the argument. I suppose that the painter too belongs to this class of makers, doesn't he?

GLAUCON: Of course. But I suppose you'll say that he doesn't truly make the things he makes.

SOCRATES: Yet, in a certain way, the painter does make a bed, doesn't he?

GLAUCON: Yes, he makes the appearance of one.

SOCRATES: What about the carpenter? Didn't you just say that he doesn't make the Form – which is our term for the being of a bed – but only *a* bed?

GLAUCON: Yes, I did say that.

SOCRATES: Now, if he doesn't make the being of a bed, he isn't making that which is, but something which is like that which is, but is not it. So, if someone were to say that the work of a carpenter or any other craftsman is completely that which is, wouldn't he risk saying what isn't true?

GLAUCON: That, at least, would be the opinion of those who busy themselves with arguments of this sort.

SOCRATES: Then let's not be surprised if the carpenter's bed, too, turns out to be a somewhat dark affair in comparison to the true one. (*Resp*. 596d–597a)[28]

The centrality of the visual image is explicit in this comparison: the mirror is able to depict anything, but only the image of a particular anything. As Glaucon points out, the mirror can therefore make things appear, but these appearances are neither real nor alive; indeed, they are so deceptive and false that even the carpenter's bed is considered a "dark affair."

28 Translated by Grube, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

The theme of *mimesis*, and its link with the arts, will be set aside for the time being, to be developed in the second and third chapters, as a further discussion at this point would only distance us from the issue at hand – namely the critique of writing.

Before moving on, however, it is worthwhile discussing two different kinds of approaches that have arisen around the issue of art and *mimesis* in the *Phaedrus*. One, similar to the one just adopted, tends to connect the critique of mimetic images in the *Phaedrus* to the critique of *mimesis* in the *Republic*; the other denies any link between the two texts.

The first line of argument may be represented by the reading Derrida offers in *Plato's Pharmacy.* Throughout the work, Derrida establishes a link between the deception caused by the mimetic image and the deception inherent to writing as Plato presents it – a discussion which focuses mainly on the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*, but also refers to the *Republic* when the theme of *mimesis* arises. Here, Derrida uses the same three features of *mimesis* just outlined, which are easy to detect as arguments against writing, by calling attention to the original kernel of Socrates' arguments: writing cannot be considered a good *techne* since it is unable to produce something that is alive, but merely reproduces. Not only this, but it also reproduces something far from the *eidos* of the *aletheia* (the shape of truth).[29] On this basis, Derrida argues that writing and painting are related: the images that they represent are mere *simulacra*, stubbornly mute.[30] In line with his original reading of the *Phaedrus*, he also draws attention to the connection between writing and painting through the use of the term *pharmaka* in the *Republic* and the polyvocal use of the term *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus*: in the *Republic,* the term *pharmaka* refers to the colours of the painter,[31] whilst in the *Phaedrus*, writing itself is considered the *pharmakon,* a *vox media* in the Egyptian myth of the discovery of writing whose ambiguous meaning has already been shown.

This last piece of evidence offered by Derrida strengthens his general point about the value of *mimesis* in Plato: any mimetic art is negative because it is far removed from the truth. The mechanism behind artistic *mimesis* is one Derrida also believes is applicable to writing, given the aggravating circumstance that "the written word gives itself as the image of the speech."[32] Eventually, the mimetic mechanism becomes so well perfected that it disappears:

29 Derrida, 1981, pp. 134–135.
30 Ibid., p. 136.
31 *Resp.* 420c.
32 Derrida, 1981, p. 137.

> A perfect imitation is no longer an imitation. If one eliminates the tiny difference that, in separating the imitator from the imitated, by that very fact refers to it, one would render the imitator absolutely different: the imitator would become another being no longer referring to the imitated.[33]

In Derrida's account of the *Phaedrus*, this is the main charge against the written word: first, it imitates the original, and then – its second crime – substitutes itself for the original. Derrida's reflection on mimetic arts in the *Phaedrus* demonstrates that there is a genuine connection between arts and writing in Plato's work. This connection is the mimetic mechanism.

It has equally been argued, however, that there is little reason to establish a link between the critique of writing and the critique of mimetic images (painting and poetry) in Plato's work, foremostly by Franco Trabattoni.

Trabattoni's reading holds that the theme of *mimesis* is not discussed at all in the *Phaedrus*,[34] and, as a matter of fact, the main charge that Socrates formulates against written speeches concerns their immobility and incapability of responding. The pre-eminence of this charge is evidenced not only in the *Phaedrus*' discussion about written words,[35] but also in other Platonic passages in which this same charge is reiterated without a link to the theme of *mimesis*.[36]

The grounds for sustaining such a position are strong. Trabattoni, for instance, rejects the mimetic mechanism precisely because it would exacerbate the polarisation between oral and written speech, a polarity he argues is inessential. Stating that writing resembles the mimetic mechanism of the arts could imply the simplistic equivalence that oral speech is the original, while written speech is a copy, divorcing both arts from each other on the basis of the value judgement Plato places on each.

Trabattoni's wariness in avoiding any simplistic equivalence is well-founded,[37] and indeed, his position on the dichotomy of orality/writing is one of the favoured interpretations of the *Phaedrus* in this work. He demonstrates that the opposition between oral and written speech is misleading since it obscures a more fundamental issue for Plato – namely, the role of persuasion

33 Ibid., p. 139. In the footnote, Derrida recalls passage 432b–c from the *Cratylus*.

34 Trabattoni, 1993, p. 31, cf. in particular n. 74.

35 *Phaedr.* 275d.

36 Cf. *Protagoras* 329a–b; *VII Ep.* 341d.

37 In evidence, Thomas Alexander Szlezák interprets the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* as if Plato argues that written speech is simply a copy, or an image, of the oral speech; hence, it is less valuable when measured against the oral exchange. Cf. Szlezák, 1999, p. 30.

in any kind of speech; however, this does not necessarily mean that the theme of *mimesis* has no place whatsoever in the *Phaedrus*.

To give just one incisive example, *mimesis* is intentionally performed by Phaedrus in his re-reading of Lysias' speech at the beginning of the dialogue. Phaedrus, who had originally wanted to perform the speech from memory, is seen to be concealing the written version of the speech by Lysias under his cloak by Socrates who then asks him to read it. This is a kaleidoscopic *mimesis* that can be understood by following the mimetic model traced by Derrida: the written speech (re-enacted orally) is a copy and hence a substitution of the original oral speech by Lysias. It is difficult to determine here whether the written speech or the oral speech comes first, given that Lysias probably first wrote the speech and then performed it orally (which would appear to partially support Trabattoni's position), but it is clear that the relevance of *mimesis* in the dialogue cannot simply be denied.

As such, *mimesis* is a theme integral to the *Phaedrus,* whose relevance lies mainly in the relation between oral and written speech, although this same relevance must be limited to the role of its mechanism (re-producing) and not to its content (oral is not the original as written is not the copy). If there is a polarisation, it is not between the oral and the written, but between production (dialectic) and reproduction (*mimesis*) of speeches.

2 "If the Author Is Really Serious, This Book Does not Contain His Best Thoughts"[38]

The other Platonic passage in which writing is criticised is in the *Seventh Letter* (324a–344d). This is a testimony that has often been regarded as controversial by many interpreters, especially as the main statement against writing appears in a linking passage between the first part of the letter, in which Plato narrates some personal events, and the second section, in which Plato outlines a general theory of human knowledge. The fact that personal events and rigorous philosophical reflections are bound together in the same letter has raised suspicions about the authenticity of the letter itself, supported by the fact that the two parts are written in different styles and, at first glance, may easily be questioned on the grounds of their continuity. A deeper assessment may show, however, that the autobiographical elements are themselves philosophically

38 *VII Ep.* 344c.

relevant, but this does not suffice to drive away doubts about the authenticity of the letter.

A discussion about the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* is not at stake in this study and may be avoided, not only because it has already been analysed in much greater depth than can be repeated here, but also because, having been studied and integrated into Platonic hermeneutics for centuries, it has, as such, become an essential part of the reflection upon Plato's philosophy and its reception. Whether authentic or not, The *Seventh Letter* is thus part of our hermeneutic horizon.[39]

In favour of the authenticity of the letter, the text could be read as indirect evidence in support of the position of those interpreters who not only consider the *Seventh Letter* to be authentic, but in fact, the most authentic text by Plato. These interpreters are the supporters of the existence of Unwritten Doctrines through which Plato supposedly transmitted his real philosophical thoughts, and consider the *Seventh Letter* to be of the utmost importance for their theory on the grounds that Plato's rejection of writing is clear in the letter, which supposedly affirms the existence and superiority of oral Unwritten Doctrines.[40] It is necessary to specify here, however, that while there are good reasons for believing that the *Seventh Letter* is authentic,[41] these reasons do not necessarily imply that there were esoteric, oral teachings that Plato offered only to a few elite students – a thesis that will be considered and examined in the next section.

As much as the passage on the critique of writing, whose style and terminology are more technical and scholastic if compared with the rest of the letter, may be considered an independent epistemological *excursus* about the nature of knowledge,[42] it is nevertheless impossible to simply dissect the letter and

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39 On the value and impact of philosophical, epistolary writing in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, cf. some remarks by Mathilde Cambron-Goulet in Skodel, 2014, pp. 148–175.

40 This is the general position of the Tübingen school.

41 The letter must be dated after the death of Dion, 353 BCE, and in fact, following stylometric parameters in analysing its contents, the *Seventh Letter* is well integrated with the later works by Plato such as the *Laws*. Cf. Adorno, 2008, pp. 235–240 and Ross, 1951, pp. 139–141. Nowadays the majority of interpreters consider it authentic with few exceptions, cf. Trabattoni, 1993, p. 200, n. 1.

42 Hans-Georg Gadamer conjectures that this epistemological *excursus* may be a kind of institutionalised introduction that Plato was used to making beforehand amongst the students in his Academia. This would explain its technical and scholastic style. Cf. Gadamer, 1993, p. 115.
It is important to specify that Gadamer's interpretation of the letter excludes the possibility that Plato refers to any esoteric theory. Gadamer simply suggests that the *excursus* may

extrapolate this passage as an independent Platonic (or pseudo-Platonic) theory of knowledge. Indeed, it is made evident in the letter itself that Plato is not concerned with tracing a theory of knowledge for its own sake; rather, he is focused on how to transmit true knowledge, which is related to the critique of writing as a method of transmitting knowledge. In turn, the critique of writing is also related to some events contingent on Plato's political-pedagogical mission in Syracuse which are narrated in the letter.

The detailed autobiographical elements regarding Plato's journeys in Syracuse may initially appear to be a chronicle of personal frustrations rather like an *excusatio non petita* for the failure of his pedagogical-political project. Conclusions about the poor philosophical value of these autobiographical accounts, however, should not be so swiftly rushed.

It cannot be denied that during these autobiographical elements, the critique of writing and the connected theory of knowledge are as poignant as to appear as the central issues of the letter, and consequently almost like a narrative frame, or else a personal defence. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that the references that Plato makes to writing in the letter are entirely contingent on the personal events he is narrating, and if there is but one central philosophical question at issue throughout the entire text, it is to proclaim how difficult and demanding the philosophical path is. This is something that Plato himself had experienced both whilst as a pupil and later on as a teacher, as well as a citizen with a political opinion.

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato writes that he would never write anything about his philosophy:

> For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the object, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself. (*VII Ep.* 342c)[43]

Indeed, across the entirety of his literary output, he never once wrote treatises or made any clear statement on his own philosophical insights in the way his pupil and Syracuse's new tyrant, the Young Dionysius, did. Indeed, the reason for Plato's referring, in the *Seventh Letter,* to the practice of writing

be a sort of formula or an example of the teaching usually carried out by Plato in the Academia, a teaching that is coherent with some epistemological evaluations that can also be found in other dialogues of the same period. Cf. Gadamer, 1980, p. 97, n. 10 and p. 98.

43 Translated by Morrow, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

philosophical content, is that Dionysius and several unknown scholars had started to write philosophical books based on what they heard about Plato's teachings; this, claimed Plato, constituted the utmost evidence that Dionysius did not have the right attitude for philosophy, both because he was evidently sure that he already had enough knowledge about many philosophical issues to shirk Plato's further teachings, and because he wrote a book approximating them.[44]

Plato distances himself from the content of these books for two kinds of reason. First, the implicit reason: unwilling to be associated with the philosophical ideas and political behaviour of Dionysius, he thus declines any responsibility for the way in which Dionysius interprets his teachings. Second, the explicit and more essential reason: Plato has a deep motivation for regarding it impossible to write on the questions about which he cares, which is intrinsically related to his conception of the nature of human knowledge.[45]

The first category of reasons may be left aside, as what has already been said suffices for understanding why Plato desired to keep his distance from the books in question. Further discussion on this point will return later, albeit from the perspective of the relationship between responsibility and *mimesis*.

For the second range of reasons, it is worth taking as a starting point the evidence that there are things about which Plato is particularly concerned – that is to say, there are questions about which he really cares.[46] These questions cannot be adequately written down by anybody – indeed, if it were possible to properly write them down, says Plato, he would have spent his entire life writing about them. No one who has written down these problems has understood them.

It cannot be concluded from this that Plato means to say here that these problems are secrets only to be revealed; their inexpressibility in fact depends on the way human knowledge is articulated and transmitted, rather than on their content. There is no essential philosophical truth that can be systematically written *or* expressed orally, because human *logoi* are weak, as Plato declares in the epistemological *excursus*.

The epistemological *excursus*, written systematically by Plato, is a teaching he admits to having already expounded orally many times. According to this teaching, any object of knowledge has three features that make knowing it possible: its name (*onoma*), its *logos* and its image (*eidolon*). Only through these

44 *VII Ep.* 341a–b.
45 *VII Ep.* 342a.
46 *VII Ep.* 341c.

three features may one actualise the knowledge (*episteme*) of the object, which is the fourth element of the knowing process, and does not pertain to the object, but to the soul of the subject that is knowing. Fifth and last comes the object of knowledge in itself, "the truly real being" (*nous*). The fifth element of knowledge does not follow spontaneously after the fourth – it may, but its spontaneity is not guaranteed, as it requires an intense philosophical activity (here the captivating metaphor of the light flashing before a fire, recalled above, supplies one image of how *nous* may be reached in this way.) Furthermore, once reached, it is difficult to communicate this *nous* because of the weakness of the *logoi*.

The weakness of the *logoi* is evidently the focal point of this *excursus*,[47] and yet it is left unexplained. Hence, a first question which may be raised is: why are the *logoi* weak and how does this affect knowledge? A further question may be: why is it specifically the *logos*, in comparison to the other elements of knowledge, that is considered weak?

In finding an answer to the first question, it must be noted that the term *logos* has here intentionally been left untranslated, given its polyvocal meanings (such as "word," "language," "discourse," "reason," etc.). In this context, it may apt to translate it as "definition," as in the letter, Plato refers to *logos* as a "composition of name and verb."[48] As such, the weakness of *logos* seems to depend on the merely approximate delimitation that occurs in the composition of names and verbs: every definition is, in fact, a delimitation, which both simultaneously explains and excludes. This is confirmed by the frustrating Socratic practice of asking "What is it?" that is characteristic of the early Platonic dialogues. As has been widely established, this latter definitional question is not destined to be answered precisely[49] – indeed, it may stimulate further philosophical investigation, but cannot properly be answered because of the same weakness of the *logoi*. The *logos,* in effect, then, exhibits its weakness in its very strength: any attempt to define will attempt to catch the essence of the object of definition, whilst simultaneously missing it because it cannot be delineated by words.

The comparison of the circle is a clear comparison that Plato employs in the *Seventh Letter* to exemplify the process of knowledge. This example is not repeated here, but the essence of the sentiment is apt: trying to catch the essence of an object of knowledge with a *logos* is like trying to square a circle.[50]

47 *VII Ep.* 343a–e.

48 *VII Ep.* 342b.

49 Cf. Fronterotta, 2001, pp. 33–39, 47–56.

50 This same image is also recalled by Gadamer, cf. Gadamer, 1980, p. 106. Plato himself seems to suggest this equivalence: "Every circle that we make or draw in common life is

What has been discussed thus far is therefore sufficient evidence to understand both why *logoi* are weak and why Plato would have never written the content of his philosophy:

> These things, moreover, because of the weakness of *logoi*, are just as much concerned with making clear the particular property of each object as the being of it. On this account no sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, especially in a form which is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines. (*VII Ep.* 342e–343a)

This conscious and motivated criticism of written words also recalls some aspects of the criticism contained in the *Phaedrus*, as pointed out earlier: written words are immobile. This criticism, however, still involves the problematic presence (or absence) of the mimetic mechanism, an issue which will be considered following address of the question raised above, regarding the reason for the exclusive weakness of the *logos*.

Concerning the weakness of the *logos*, it is worth considering the detailed reading of the *Seventh Letter* by Hans-Georg Gadamer.[51] In his analysis, Gadamer points to the particular weakness of the *logos* as presented in the letter, but argues that this peculiarity also affects the other elements involved in the process of knowledge (name, image, *episteme*) which together aim to reach the fifth and final element (*nous*). The weakness of the *logoi* is, in general terms therefore the weakness of human knowledge itself:

> Plato leaves no doubt that even knowledge of the ideas, although it cannot merely be derived from language and words, is still not to be attained without them [the *logoi*] (*Cratylus* 433a, 438b). The weakness of the *logoi*, which is the weakness of all four, is precisely the weakness of our intellect itself which depends upon them.[52]

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full of characteristics that contradict the 'fifth,' for it everywhere touches a straight line, while the circle itself, we say, has in it not the slightest element belonging to a contrary nature. And we say that their names are by no means fixed; there is no reason why what we call 'circles' might not be called 'straight lines,' and the straight lines 'circles,' and their natures will be none the less fixed despite this exchange of names. Indeed the same thing is true of the definition: since it is a combination of nouns and verbs, there is nothing surely fixed about it." (*VII Ep.* 343b).

51 Cf. Gadamer, 1980, pp. 93–123.

52 Ibid., p. 105.

The sense of this statement becomes clearer upon realising that Gadamer regards the theory of knowledge in the *Seventh Letter* as a theory of communication (of knowledge): Plato is not interested in defining a theory of knowledge for its own sake, but instead concerned with how his teaching has been received and divulged. From this perspective, it is possible to acknowledge the connection that Gadamer establishes between the quotation above and the passages of the *Cratylus*[53] where the necessity of the *logoi* is learning and communicating them correctly. The Gadamerian interpretation therefore confirms the hypothesis that the autobiographical section and the epistemological *excursus* of the letter are closely connected. The failure of the political mission in Syracuse was also the failure of the communication of philosophical teachings to Dionysius. This failure is two-sided, in reflection of the relation between teacher and pupil, wherein the teacher fails on account of the philosophical indisposition of the pupil.[54] This reinforces the belief that the *Seventh Letter* is an exceptional testimony about the difficulties of the philosophical path, which requires not only a guide, but equally a pupil honestly willing to be guided. Furthermore, the major challenge on the philosophical path is the frustration and incompleteness of each step, which depends, as has been noted, on the nature of human knowledge, and thus on the special status of the human soul.

Indeed, the soul plays a defining role in the theory of knowledge, although its relevance is not immediately graspable. For this reason, a more detailed exploration of the elements of the epistemological *excursus* is necessary to understand both how the weakness of one element – the *logos* – affects the other elements, as well as the role that the soul has in this process.[55]

The five elements in the theory of knowledge are listed one after the other, as if in a hierarchical structure. In a certain sense, this much is accurate, insofar

53 *Crat.* 433a, 438b. Translated by Reeve, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

54 The feeling of being defeated that comes from this biographical story should sound quite familiar if compared to the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades. Cf. the entire *Alcibiades I*, *Symposium* 213e–222c; for an historical account of this relation, cf. Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades*, and De Romilly, 1997.

55 Gadamer considers that the weakness of the *logoi* is the weakness of all four elements (name, *logos*, image, knowledge), but in his view the weakness of the knowledge realised by the soul has a peculiar status because it depends on the features and on the philosophical disposition of every single soul (Gadamer, 1980, p. 112). Trabattoni disagrees with this interpretation by Gadamer, and rather considers that the weakness of the soul depends on its interrelation with the name, *logos,* and image, which are weak themselves. Trabattoni holds that the fourth is the subjective reflection of the three elements of the object and this is why the fourth is also weak (Trabattoni, 1993, pp. 207–208). Trabattoni's interpretation seems more convincing, even if the singularity and the philosophical disposition of the souls has a decisive role in the *Seventh Letter*. Unfortunately, a discussion about the role of the soul in the process of knowledge does not find space in this manuscript.

as the weakness of the *logoi* can allow Plato to build a hierarchy, and it is possible to see two nuances in this presentation: one is the chronological order of the elements; another is their qualitative order.

Starting from the consideration of chronological order, it must be presumed that this succession of elements only works if the theory is considered a theory of communication of knowledge rather than a theory of knowledge itself. When one desires to communicate knowledge, this process must suppose that there is, on the other side of the knowing process, someone who is learning by following the same passages: the complete picture of knowledge about a particular object is communicated by starting with the name of the object, then giving a definition of it, and ultimately providing an image of the original. Only after the communication of each of these elements comes the fourth element – *episteme* – which is a self-elaboration of the previous three by the learning subject. Last comes the *nous*, the perception of the thing itself, the fifth element that "after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the object, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself."[56]

In regard to the qualitative order of the elements, three levels in the hierarchy may be established. At the first level can be placed the name, the *logos,* and the image directly which pertain to the object of knowledge; at the second level, there is the act of knowing these three features via a human soul; the third and last level eventually brings the perception of the thing in itself. Paradoxically, one needs the first step to reach the last, but the fulfilment of the last level is impeded by the persistence of the elements on the first level.

The differences among these three levels are glaring, with the distance between one level and another appearing to be as difficult a gap to traverse as the task of fully knowing something.[57] Initially, knowledge begins with the contingency of an object of knowledge and its definition (name, *logos*, image); subsequently the second stage requires an immaterial elaboration of these elements by a soul whose structure should be receptive to *logoi* to transform them into knowledge (*episteme*); at the final stage stands the thing itself (*nous*), the ungraspable essence of the object of knowledge for what it is. This is something that transcends a particular soul, but at the same time, may only be grasped by the soul; it is also something that has nothing to do with any contingency,

56 *VII Ep.* 341c–d.

57 Trabattoni fruitfully compares some peculiarities of this theory of knowledge both with the famous statement by Gorgias about the incommunicability of knowledge, and with Protagoras' acknowledgement of the difficulties of turning the contingent traits of an object into properties of a subject. Cf. Trabattoni, 1999, p. 110.

but at the same time, requires a contingent object of knowledge as a prerequisite of access to it.

In the process of knowledge, the special status of the soul is as an intermediary between the perceivable object and the object in itself, a transition which is only possible through the catalysing effect of the soul to subjectively reflect the structure of the first level and convert it into knowledge. This helps to further clarify the weakness of the *logoi*, as the first and the second levels represent a tragic blend of necessity and failure in the act of defining. This does not, however, mean that the last level is unachievable because of failure at the previous levels, and indeed, Plato never suggests that knowledge is impossible – indeed it is difficult to grasp and it is not definitional, but it eventually shines forth in such circumstances:

> By the repeated use of all these instruments [the four elements of knowledge], ascending and descending to each in turn, it is barely possible for knowledge to be engendered of an object naturally good, in a man naturally good; but if his nature is defective, as is that of most men, for the acquisition of knowledge and the so-called virtues, and if the qualities he has have been corrupted, then not even Lynceus could make such a man see. (*VII Ep*. 343e–344a)

For success in the process of gaining knowledge, the natural disposition of a soul seems as determinant as the will to engage in the philosophical enterprise, especially given that the special intermediate status of the soul manifests itself in another aspect within the *long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil*. This is the vitality of the soul, which clashes with the immobility and the silence of *logos*. Anything possessing a soul is alive; hence, this thing is able to respond and to be responsible for itself. This responsiveness shows the soul's strength in the dialectical relation between teacher and pupil, where a good philosophical relation is alive and productive: it produces true knowledge that continues disseminating its life – to use the famous metaphor of the *Seventh Letter*, true knowledge is like the light flashing from a fire when kindled; it is lively and sheds itself – the precise opposite of cold, mute, and immobile words that are either written or orally performed.

At this stage, it should be clear that this critique of writing does not mean that no one can write about Plato's thoughts (as indeed is happening here in this work), nor that there are secret teachings that can be expounded only orally. Both an oral explanation and a written account, have the same boundaries[58]

58 Cf. Isnardi Parente, 1970, pp. 152–154.

caused by the weakness of *logos* which consists in defining without grasping the object of knowledge itself. The soul would be able to grasp the thing itself, but before reaching it, the soul needs *logoi*. *Logos* is therefore necessary to know an object, but also somehow immobilises the liveliness of the object itself, and thereby inhibits the lively soul from reaching *nous*.

The exploration of this epistemological *excursus* will not be taken any further, as the main scope of this discussion is to better understand the sense of the critique of writing in the *Seventh Letter*. Indeed, what may now be explained is the specific problem with writing, which is that it exacerbates the weakness of the *logoi*, given that the failure of the definition becomes overexposed when it presents itself in the immobile shape of written outlines.

The problem here is even more complex because, beyond its incontestable philosophical value, the critique of writing in the *Seventh Letter* is embedded within the context of a particular event: Dionysius, and other scholars at his court, writing books about Plato's philosophy.

Within this context can be seen certain aspects of the issue of *mimesis*. Clearly, the knot that binds the critique of writing and the communicability of knowledge is not that Dionysius wrote a book, but that he wrote a book on what he presumed to have learned from Plato's philosophy while presenting those contents as his own. There are at least three distinct negative aspects which characterise this episode: first, Dionysius assumed he had understood Plato's philosophy where he had not, due to his lack of persistence and effort that the philosophical path requires; second, Dionysius recorded Plato's teachings, or at least, what he had heard and understood about Plato's teachings, in writing; third, Dionysius (as did other unknown scholars) presented the concepts of the book as his own philosophical ideas.

In response, Plato states his definite and final opposition to the act of writing on philosophical concepts:

> So much at least I can affirm with confidence about any who have written or propose to write on these problems, pretending to a knowledge of the questions about which I care, whether they claim to have learned from me or from others or to have made their discoveries for themselves: it is impossible, in my opinion, that they can have learned anything at all about the subject. There is no writing of mine about these questions, nor will there ever be one. (VII *Ep*. 341b–c)

In other words, if one is writing about these questions, one automatically demonstrates that one did not understand them.

The theory of (communication of) knowledge that follows next in the letter serves to explain why it is impossible to divulge to the multitude the questions about which Plato cares: true knowledge is hard to communicate and to receive; furthermore, it requires philosophically inclined souls, who are seriously engaged in the philosophical enterprise.

It seems that a soul such as that of Dionysius is not able to express any philosophical concept. Certainly, Dionysius would easily be able to reproduce contents heard superficially from someone else, repeating them without any awareness of the effort of getting to know something (for which reason he was capable of reproducing philosophical thought), but ultimately, he was unable to produce any authentic philosophical (*dia*)*logos*. Behind this critique, it is once again possible to glimpse the same mimetic mechanism explored earlier in relation to the *Phaedrus*.

It has been already pointed out that the critiques of writing in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* have the same pivot – namely the mutism of written words, and thus their immobility and inability to reply. Now it is possible to elaborate on this to make more explicit something that is disguised through Plato's metaphors and allusions: first, the anthropomorphism, or even the animism, of the *logoi*,[59] then, the "dialectic of the image" in which *logoi* are trapped.[60]

The animism of *logoi* means that true *logoi* are alive and can transmit life – they are productive and displayed in a dialectical relation – while false *logoi* are half-dead, reproduced, and unable to reply. In the latter case, the case of written *logoi* may be recognised. The range of this metaphor becomes wider when it refers to the responsibility and responsiveness of the *logoi*: to say that *logoi* are alive means that they have a soul; this soul and life inhabiting true *logoi* imply that there must be a generator, a father who gave life to them. The (exclusively male) anthropomorphism involved in these metaphors implies that if the *logos* (the son) cannot answer independently, then its father is required to respond and be responsible for it. Here then, is an aspect of the superiority of oral exchange – i.e., the fact that the voice is alive and its bearer is alive, and thus that he must always be united with its *logoi*; oral transmission is orphaned, as written *logoi* are.

Going back to the *Seventh Letter*, it is now legitimate to ask: who is the father of the *logoi* in the books written by Dionysius and those unknown scholars? The resolute distance that Plato maintains from them clearly implies that he

59 These terms and the general approach to the metaphor come from the essay *Plato's Pharmacy* by Jacques Derrida, in particular cf. Derrida, 1981, p. 143. The discourse about the responsiveness and liveness of the *logoi* is further analysed in the third chapter.

60 Cf. Gadamer, 1980, p. 112.

is not responsible for (he is not the father of) them. Similarly, the philosophical superficiality with which Dionysius has reproduced those *logoi* also makes him unable to respond for them – besides, Dionysius' *logoi*, meshed in the reproduction of reproduction, are closer to death than life. Those scholars who believed it possible to write, immobilise, and devitalise the questions about which Plato cares cannot answer for these *logoi,* given that they almost killed them. Instead, it seems that they are illegitimate, orphaned, and sterile, and, as such, nobody may really claim their paternity or kindle any life in them.

As with the *Phaedrus*, in the *Seventh Letter,* the paradigm of the image also has a determinant role, but is, in this context, primarily connected with the epistemological *excursus*. In the *Phaedrus*, the connection depends on the immobility of written words, the same kind of immobility as that of painted images, but this connection is not as explicit in the *Seventh Letter.* Earlier it was argued, coherent with Gadamer's interpretation, that the weakness of the *logoi* is, in truth, a weakness of all four elements of knowledge. Though it may seem like circular reasoning if it follows from this premise that all four means are trapped in the dialectic of the image,[61] this is precisely what Gadamer argues for when he implies that the dialectic of the image is the key to the entire *excursus*:

> All four means are trapped in the dialectic of the image or copy, for insofar as all four are intended to present the thing in and through themselves they must of necessity have a reality of their own. That which is meant to present something cannot be that thing. It lies in the nature of the means of knowing that in order to be means they must have something inessential about them. This, according to Plato, is the source of our error, for we are always misled into taking that which is inessential for something essential.[62]

Whilst Gadamer's is adequate and coherent with the previous evaluations, it must nevertheless be specified precisely what "image" (*eidolon*) means here. As the third element listed in the process of knowledge described in the *Seventh Letter*,[63] it could be said that the image is a deictic moment in the process of knowledge, where the image of an object of knowledge is a concrete thing that may be pointed to, and which allows one to say: "*X* is this thing that I am pointing to and that you can see yourself – without any more definitional effort." This image is both true and real, but also partial: while it shows the

61 Ibid.
62 Gadamer, 1980, pp. 112–113.
63 *VII Ep.* 342b.

thing, it simultaneously hides the thing in itself (*eidos*). As such, it is correct to say that this image that can be pointed to is inessential, but at the same time, we are unable to avoid it because it is all we can see. Human beings cannot see the essence, the *eidos* of the object, but only the copy, the *eidolon*.

The sense of the image to which Gadamer refers is more generic and transcends the particular deictic moment of the *excursus* – his dialectic of the image refers to the general mechanism of human epistemology about which essences (*eide*) are knowable only through appearances (*eidola*). This is true of every means we have to know, and hence is valid for the entire epistemological *excursus*. Once again, it is the mechanism that must be considered rather than the content.

There is no circularity, therefore, in saying that the weakness of the *logoi* is the weakness of all four elements of knowledge, and that, at the same time, the dialectic of the image (i.e., the dialectic between *eidos* and *eidolon*) traps all four elements. To reinforce this interpretation, it is worth quoting a celebrated passage from the *Phaedo*:

> When I had wearied of investigating things, I thought that I must be careful to avoid the experience of those who watch an eclipse of the sun, for some of them ruin their eyes unless they watch its reflection in water or some such material. A similar thought crossed my mind, and I feared that my soul would be altogether blinded if I looked at things with my eyes and tried to grasp them with each of my senses. So I thought I must take refuge in discussions [*logoi*] and investigate the truth of things by means of words. However, perhaps this analogy is inadequate, for I certainly do not admit that one who investigates things by means of words is dealing with images any more than one who looks at facts. (*Phaed*. 99e–100a)[64]

Logoi are a place in which human beings may take refuge and evade the confining dialectic of the image. Thanks to the *logoi*, it is possible to give a limited account of what we try to know, to attempt to walk along the philosophical path, and, when we fail on it, to start over again. *Logoi,* at least, give us the chance to move and to evolve from the immobility of every *eidolon* towards the ungraspable *eidos*. Dealing with *logoi,* however, does not mean that the dialectic of the image is overcome and left aside; in fact, any definition (*logos*) is itself an *eidolon* met on the way towards *nous*.

64 Translated by Grube, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

The dialectic of the image is a central paradigm in Plato's works, which, as will later be shown, plays an equally integral role in the critiques of writing and orality.

3 "If a Man Has Nothing More Valuable Than What He Has Composed or Written"[65]

The first two sections of this chapter dealt with the critique of writing in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, respectively. Greatest attention has been given to these two passages as the only known evidence of direct criticism of writing from Plato, the same reason for which some contemporary interpreters have also considered these passages the most valuable evidence in favour of the supremacy of orality over writing in Platonic philosophy.

To state that these two passages are the most valuable because they come directly from Plato's works, implies that there also exists other, indirect evidence for the supremacy of orality in his work, and indeed there are various other testimonies, mostly indirect testimonies derived from Platonic disciples and interpreters, which support this position. Within these indirect testimonies, it is helpful to distinguish between A. ancient evidence, and B. contemporary interpretations.

Within ancient evidence, critics have distinguished between: A.1) passages from ancient works written by authors who were contemporary with or lived relatively soon after Plato; A.2) some obscurities that Plato seems to have intentionally left in his works. A few passages of the latter will be mentioned here, in accordance with their order of relevance.

A.1) The most famous indirect testimony in support of the theory of the existence of the Platonic Unwritten Doctrines comes from Aristotle. In the IV Book of *Physics,* Aristotle clearly writes that "in the so-called Unwritten Doctrines,"[66] Plato gives a definition of matter and spatiality which is slightly different if compared to the definition contained in the written dialogue, the *Timaeus*.[67]

This passage is relevant for three main reasons. First, on account of the provenance of the witness – Aristotle, as a direct pupil of Plato in his Academia for at least twenty years, was most likely one of the best-informed and direct witnesses of the oral teachings. Second, Aristotle appears to take for granted that

65 *Phaedr.* 278d.

66 *En tois legomenois agraphois dogmasin, Physics* IV, 2, 209b15.

67 Cf. *Tim.* 52a–b and 57c.

there existed something known as the "Unwritten Doctrines," which therefore seems to imply that it was possible that the existence of these teachings was widely known, even if limited to a few pupils. Third, Aristotle clearly states that there is a distinction – at least in this case – between the Unwritten Doctrines and the written dialogues.[68]

This third point is definitive, and is the basis upon which some have assumed that Plato gave oral teachings that were deliberately different from the theories that can be excerpted from his written works. Consequently, some scholars have attempted to outline the contents of these oral teachings, believing that the most fundamental elements of Platonic philosophy were communicated through the theories expounded orally, a theory that is corroborated by the critiques of writing expressed in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*.

Anyone who has not yet been influenced by the *wirkungsgeschichte* that has developed around this topic, is able to detect some unnecessary cause-effect relations in this chain of reasoning. Starting from the passage of the *Physics*, it seems possible to rely on Aristotle to the degree that the existence of oral teachings based on Platonic doctrines may be inferred, and that these might sometimes have differed from theoretical elements written in the dialogues. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily follow from these relatively unproblematic premises that there is a difference, intentionally imposed by Plato, between the contents of the dialogues and the oral teachings. For this reason, it seems that there is little ground to assume that the theories exposed orally were somehow "more authentic" than the written ones.

The distinction that Aristotle delineates in regard to the *Timaeus* is a very detailed one. Here some have argued that these kinds of discrepancies are likely to have arisen on the basis of evolution in Plato's thought, during the lapse of time which probably occurred between writing the dialogue and exploring similar theories in oral teachings.[69] While this latter interpretation may be convincing in the view of some, however, against there is not sufficient evidence to support it. Similarly, it should also not be inferred from this that what Plato taught orally was almost secret, highly inspired, and exclusive. It is

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68 On a side note, one of the key questions here would be: who is in the habit of referring to Plato's unwritten doctrines (*hypo tinos legomenois*)? In view of some recent articles on Xenocrates by Sedley (Sedley, 2021), it seems obvious that Xenocrates was laying claim to special insights into the "authentic" Platonic system, perhaps with a highly selective notion of which texts could be used. Since traditionally Xenocrates is Aristotle's rival, it is likely that Aristotle says nothing more than certain persons claim that some established doctrines of Plato went unwritten.

69 Among most contemporary interpreters, it is commonly accepted that Plato's oral teachings occurred later in his lifetime. Cf. Nikulin, 2012, p. 7.

widely known that Plato established his Academia with the purpose of teaching philosophy and educating the souls of a few pupils, and indeed, the selection of the students was most likely strict (probably based on the philosophical inclination of their souls), for which reason the audience of his oral teachings was necessarily small and elitist. It seems hard to see any necessary reason to overestimate the Aristotelian passage of the *Physics*, however, and there is certainly no ground to infer from this that oral teachings were either the most authentic of Plato's words, or that they were intentionally secretive.

Indeed, there are several interesting philosophical positions that question the effective relevance of this passage from Aristotle, one of which comes from Trabattoni. Offering a particularly balanced position, his analysis first considers a preliminary aspect of Aristotle's methodology in interpreting and reading the theories of his predecessors. Here he notes that Aristotle tends to translate the theories of his predecessors into his own philosophical language, a subtle and apparently innocent operation that is fully evidenced in the well-known Books I and XIII of the *Metaphysics*.

In Book I, in particular, Aristotle sketches a draft of the History of Philosophy (in the thus far known History of Philosophy at his time), then chronologically analyses and criticises the theories of his predecessors. Trabattoni makes an excellent point about this operation, arguing that Aristotle's primary interest is not in the History of Philosophy itself, but in establishing a ground of truth,[70] which is to say that Aristotle is not interested in accurately reporting the investigations of his predecessors (Plato included); rather, he attempts to use his predecessors as terms of comparison for testing or supporting his own philosophical theories. This is also the reason why Aristotle applies his filter retrospectively and often forces the theories of his predecessors into functional, but limited, categories.[71]

While Trabattoni recognises the plausible existence of oral doctrines and admits the existence of discrepancies in Plato's works, he nevertheless warns of the risk of misinterpreting Plato if these discrepancies are read from Aristotle's perspective.[72] In contrast to Aristotle, Plato did not seem interested in definite statements about First Principles and truth, which, it is important to underline,

70 Trabattoni, 1999, p. 43 ff.

71 This operation by Aristotle is factual and coherent, not only with his idea of a chronological development of truth which lies beyond the historical part of the *Metaphysics*, but also with his inclusive way of structuring philosophical arguments as if a qualitative development of truth can be guaranteed by analytic structures, categorisations, and use of syllogisms.

72 Trabattoni, 1999, p. 49.

was a primary reason for his regard of writing as insufficient for expressing truth – it is on the basis of this that he did not write treatises, as Aristotle did.[73]

To consider a less nuanced interpretation of the matter, Harold Cherniss' discussion of the *Physics* passage by Aristotle adopts a much more radical position. At the extreme opposite end of the spectrum to those who value Aristotle's indirect testament as the most pertinent piece of evidence in favour of the existence of the Unwritten Doctrines, Cherniss claims that Aristotle entirely misinterpreted Plato's thought, and therefore denies the existence of any such Doctrines. Given that Cherniss' work on the supposed Aristotelian misinterpretation of Plato was published before the theories of Unwritten Doctrines were elaborated by later interpreters, then, this position cannot be considered a direct response or contraposition to those supportive of the Unwritten Doctrines theory.[74]

To understand the Aristotelian claim about Plato's unwritten doctrines, first Cherniss closely analyses the criticism that Aristotle developed around the passage in the *Timaeus*,[75] which he then contradicts on a technicality. According to Cherniss, the reason for Aristotle's possible misinterpretation comes down to reasons similar to those enumerated later by Trabattoni: Aristotle tends to translate Plato's thought in his own terms, which, as Cherniss notes, cannot work positively. The difference in this analysis from Trabattoni's position, however, is that is not interested in denying the existence of Unwritten Doctrines as its primary focus; rather, Cherniss intends to demonstrate the shortcomings of the Aristotelian interpretation of Plato, even though he also minimises the relevance of the ancient indirect tradition[76] and the contemporary trend[77] that, along with Aristotle, preserved the hypothesis of the existence of unwritten esoteric doctrines in Plato.

A further relevant point which is supportive of Cherniss' reading of the Unwritten Doctrines, is made by Wolfgang-Rainer Mann. Mann's argument is to stress that when Aristotle refers to the *agraphata dogmata*, he does not posit a difference in content between the oral teachings and the written dialogues – and indeed, he seems to take for granted that there is a doctrinal overlap between these two. Restating Cherniss' position, Mann therefore holds that

73 Plato in his writings uses language to nudge us towards the truth as he conceives it. It seems hard to imagine him employing language in a radically different way orally.

74 The first publication of *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* by Harold Cherniss was in 1944; while the very first publications in regard to the theory of unwritten Platonic doctrines appeared in the late fifties/early sixties (Krämer, 1959 and Gaiser, 1963).

75 Cherniss, 1944, pp. 113–116.

76 Ibid., pp. 564–566.

77 He mainly refers to Léon Robin, Julius Stenzel, and Eduard Zeller, cf. ibid., *Foreword*.

Plato expresses the same sentiment in both the *Timaeus* and in the *agraphata dogmata*, albeit expressing himself differently in each context.[78]

It must be noted that the contemporary interpreters who have asserted the superiority of the oral teachings have not done so solely on the narrow *agraphata dogmata* passage from the *Physics*, but have also based their evaluations on other indirect testimonies.

One equally important testimony is passage X 248–283 from the work *Adversus Mathematicos* by Sextus Empiricus (second century). In this passage, Sextus Empiricus links certain notions of mathematics and geometry to the Platonic theory of Ideas, as well as details about the mathematical/geometrical relation between the One and the Indefinite Dyad (though he clearly assigns this theory to Pythagoras). The complex theories expressed in Empiricus' testimony have been used by the Tübingen school as one contribution which outlines the contents of the supposed Platonic Unwritten Doctrines, although the reliability of the passage has inevitably been questioned – not only as evidence to support the theory of Unwritten Doctrines, but as a possible source of any Platonic teaching whatsoever.

A detailed analysis of the insufficiency of this passage as valid testimony for the theory of Unwritten Doctrines has been carried out by Gregory Vlastos in his review of Krämer's work.[79] The first major shortcoming he points to, concerns the misuse of Sextus' passage:

> What is particularly surprising, in view of the vast evidential weight Sx [Sextus Empiricus] is expected to carry, is the complete absence of a *Quellenkritik* of this whole text. [...] There is no serious confrontation of the problem raised by the fact that everything in Sx which is taken by K. [Krämer] as a disclosure of Platonic Philosophy is presented by Sextus as the teachings of Pythagoreans, except for a single parenthetical reference to Plato.[80]

Vlastos also identifies other, more technical shortcomings that do not recommend the use of the passage as a reliable testimony, and yet most of the supporters of the Unwritten Doctrines theory continue to regard this passage as strong evidence for their position.

Further evidence they employ also comes from the testimonies of two ancient philosophers, Aristoxenus and Simplicius, who reported on the

78 Mann, 2006, p. 378.

79 Vlastos, 1973, pp. 379–398.

80 Ibid., p. 385.

existence of Platonic Unwritten Doctrines, specifically, the same oral speech that Plato supposedly gave on the Idea of the Good, in their respective works.

In *The Harmonics* (II, 39–40 Da Rios), Aristoxenus of Tarentum (fourth century BCE), a direct pupil of Aristotle, narrates an episode about a *Lecture on the Good* during which Plato, rather than discussing wealth, health, strength, and happiness, as many listeners were expecting, instead spoke about mathematics, geometry and astronomy, leaving most of the audience either surprised or disappointed. Some centuries later, in the fourth century, the Neoplatonist Simplicius reports a similar episode in his commentary *On Aristotle Physics* (151, 6–29 Diels), adding that it is highly probable that Plato also spoke about unity and duality on that occasion, having been influenced by Pythagorean doctrines.

Although further relevant testimonies have been collected by Hans Joachim Krämer[81] and Margherita Isnardi Parente,[82] in the context of this work, attention has been limited solely to the few passages discussed above, which are deemed the most pertinent samples.

A.2) The last ancient and indirect testimonies that will be considered here are some omissions (also known as "Platonic gaps")[83] that Plato appears to have left intentionally in the dialogues. Though there exist many "omissions" (i.e., a passage of a dialogue which is obscure and unclear), eleven of these "gaps" have been established as intentional omissions.[84] This obscurity might sometimes seem deliberate, as in most occurrences it seems that Plato did not want to exhaust a reasoning, and while usually the opacity of these passages relates to their philosophical content, it may also be a recollection of something else – through a reference, an allusion, or a promise to explore the issue on another occasion.

Friedrich Schleiermacher has argued that these kinds of allusions and gaps are distinguishing traits of Plato's style, which were aimed at making his

81 Ibid.

82 Isnardi Parente, 1997.

83 The term *Aussparungsstellen* (generically translated as "omissions") was coined and introduced for the first time by Thomas Alexander Szlezák in his work *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie* (1985) translated into Italian, with the agreement of the author, as *Platone e la scrittura della filosofia. Analisi di struttura dei dialoghi della giovinezza e della maturità alla luce di un nuovo paradigma ermeneutico*, in 1988.

84 The eleven passages listed by Hans Krämer are: *Prot.* 356e–357c; *Men.* 76e–77b; *Phaed.* 107b; *Resp.* 506d–507a and 509c; *Parm.* 136d–e; *Soph.* 254b–d; *Pol.* 284a–e; *Tim.* 48c–e, and 53c–d; *Leg.* 894a. Cf. Krämer, 1989, *Appendix II*.

writing more similar to oral expression.[85] This position – which is evocative as it calls into question the relevance of choosing a certain writing style – has been reasonably opposed by Thomas Alexander Szlezák, whose main opposition to Schleiermacher's position is grounded in Plato's explicit critique of writing.

As Szlezák notes, it is impossible to deny that the critique of writing necessarily pertains to everything that Plato himself had written, which, if valid and taken seriously, implies that the dialogues cannot be read hermeneutically – as Schleiermacher intended – nor be considered the only valid source of the Platonic doctrine. Basing his interpretation on a philological analysis, Szlezák states that the dialogues are "reliant on oral supplementation," particularly when Plato recalls "things of greater value" which can only be expressed orally,[86] and attempts to categorise the omissions into different types.[87] These include Plato's frequent use of quotations and myths, or his reference to higher truths or "higher *archai*" (which would be entirely obscure if not integrated with the theories developed by other contemporary interpreters, such as Konrad Gaiser). The third type of omission Szlezák identifies is not related to allusions, but pertains to a "dramaturgical device" which consists in interrupting the narration of the dialogue to signal something relevant, intended by the interruption, alongside a final category of instances in which Plato refers to something that was said earlier in the same dialogue, but which was neither previously explained nor concluded (this can easily be the case with long dialogues such as the *Republic*).

The role of these omissions works well within the framework of any interpretation that considers orality superior to writing in Plato's philosophy, by

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85 The work by Schleiermacher, *Introductions to the Dialogue of Plato*, does not play a relevant role in this manuscript. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the strong impact of this work on the later "Unwritten Doctrines" issue. Schleiermacher's work is, in fact, considered to be at the root of the debate that developed around this topic. His position denies the existence of any oral teaching by Plato, given that he denies the existence of oral teachings, or at least that these did not add something more or something deeper to what had been said in the written dialogues. Schleiermacher rather argues in favour of a hermeneutics of the written text, holding that the dialogues are autarchic and they themselves bear all of Plato's philosophy. At this point, it should be noted that Schleiermacher did not consider the *Seventh Letter* an authentic work by Plato, which is why its contents have not been analysed by him.
The reason for not involving Schleiermacher's arguments in this work is due to the attempt to limit the history of the critics to a more contemporary sphere that contains only elements of the critique from Schleiermacher.

86 Szlezák, 1999, p. 61.

87 For a more detailed account of these types of omissions, cf. ibid., pp. 61–64.

offering the opportunity to believe that the issues which are omitted in the written dialogues were probably covered and integrated through the oral teachings. Despite Szlezák's arguments being built on solid philological assumptions and a careful reading of the dialogues, however, they fail to offer a sufficiently probing analysis to support the superiority of oral doctrines over the written dialogues by Plato.

Indeed, within the interpretation presented in this work, the omissions present in the dialogues do not represent testimonies of the superiority of orality over writing, but rather a mere general, Platonic denial of exhaustive definitions and definite statements. As argued earlier, Plato applies a fluid and dialectical form of reasoning to his philosophical insights, which is one of his primary reasons for criticising writing as a means of communication: writing is too rigid, sterile, and not alive in the way any authentic thought needs to be. The fact that Plato is often unclear and inconsistent about definitive definitions in his dialogues should therefore not be read as a hint to other sources of communication (oral esoteric teachings), but instead as a denial of any stiff reasoning. Whilst means of transmitting knowledge, whether orally or in writing, remain relevant inquiries, these are secondary to the question of the nature of knowledge and its internal structure which are the issues primarily at stake for Plato.

B.) Many contemporary interpreters have nevertheless attempted, rather admirably, to fill in the gaps left in the dialogues, and reshaped what is potentially a plausible Platonic theory of Ideas interlaced with mathematics and geometry. Relying on the contemporary testimonies mentioned at the beginning of this section, these interpreters have attempted to outline the potential contents of the Unwritten Doctrines by integrating elements of ontology, geometry, and mathematics with the incomplete theories expressed in the dialogues.

The most widely accepted interpretation of this issue is that there were two stages in Plato's life which corresponded to two different stages in his philosophical development: at an early stage, Plato elaborated a theory of Ideas detectable in the dialogues; later, he developed a theory of Ideas and numbers which was primarily divulged through oral transmission to a limited number of pupils.[88] This set of testimonies (direct and indirect) has created a wide and strong enough foundation on which to build the contemporary theory of the "Unwritten Doctrines."

88 Cf. Nikulin, 2012, Chapter 1, and Trabattoni, 1999, p. 5.

In this regard, testimony from Aristotle has once again been integral to these interpreters' purposes. In Book XIII of *Metaphysics*,[89] Aristotle declares that a theory of numbers was developed by Plato after the theory of Ideas, and that this was somehow a further expression of the same preceding theory of Ideas. It should, however, be pointed out that Aristotle never presents these theories as something learned directly from Plato, and explicitly makes deductions trying to clarify some obscurities found in his philosophy;[90] the absolute reliability attributed to Aristotle's testimonies should be limited when it comes to these instances of deduction.

The most determinant part of the development of the "Unwritten Doctrines" theory took place between the *Universität Tübingen* and the *Università Cattolica di Milano* around 1980, although the roots of the discussion, whether in support or opposition, precede the late twentieth century, and date back to the scholarship of Schleiermacher, Eduard Gottlob Zeller, Léon Robin and Julius Stenzel – to mention just a few of the relevant names in the debate – in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This work intentionally excludes an analysis of the early stage of this theory, however, and chooses instead to focus on the theory's development that runs from the fifties to the nineties of the last century, given the greater number of works on the topic published in those decades. From these more recent publications emerged an innovative paradigm through which to re-interpret Plato anew based on the contents of the "Unwritten Doctrines," both of which are addressed in the following section.

4 "Nothing More Valuable"[91]

On the basis of direct and indirect testimonies, omissions, and interpretations of Plato's dialogues, certain contemporary interpreters have been able to develop a presumed Platonic theory of Ideas, numbers, and geometry. Despite being only presumed and hypothetical, however, these interpreters paradoxically regard this theory as the more authentic and trustworthy, despite the presence of the dialogues as the only remaining direct testimonies.

Once again, it is important to underline the two main reasons why the presumed oral theory has been considered more valuable: first, due to its exemption from the Platonic critique of writing which encompasses the dialogues

89 *Metaphysics* 1078b9–12.

90 *Metaphysics* 987b31–33. For a more complete and detailed account cf. Trabattoni, 1999, p. 70.

91 *Phaedr.* 278d–e.

(but also the critique itself, indisputably); and second, because the oral theory presumably dealt with things of greater value (*timiotera*). Indeed, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato writes that the difference between a philosopher and a mere writer is that the philosopher possesses something more valuable than written words, which, as some interpreters assert, seems to imply that he possessed some kind of oral theory which dealt with things of greater value.

> SOCRATES: Well, then: our playful amusement regarding discourse is complete. Now you go and tell Lysias that we came to the spring which is sacred to the Nymphs and heard words charging us to deliver a message to Lysias and anyone else who composes speeches, as well as to Homer and anyone else who has composed poetry either spoken or sung, and third, to Solon and anyone else who writes political documents that he calls laws: "If any one of you has composed these things with a knowledge of the truth, if you can defend your writing when you are challenged, and if you can yourself make the argument that your writing is of little worth, then you must be called by a name derived not from these writings but rather from those things that you are seriously pursuing."
>
> PHAEDRUS: What name, then, would you give such a man?
>
> SOCRATES: To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems to me too much, and proper only for a god. To call him wisdom's lover – a philosopher – or something similar would fit him better and be more seemly.
>
> PHAEDRUS: That would be quite appropriate.
>
> SOCRATES: On the other hand, if a man has nothing more valuable [*timiotera*] than what he has composed or written, spending long hours twisting it around, pasting parts together and taking them apart – wouldn't you be right to call him a poet or a speech writer or an author of laws?
>
> PHAEDRUS: Of course. (*Phaedr*. 278b–e)

These interpreters have based their deductions around this suggestion of things of greater value to successfully reconstruct the presumed contents of Plato's oral theory. In particular, Hans Joachim Krämer and Konrad Gaiser, both professors at *Universität Tübingen,* undertook to identify the contents of the oral theories with the contents of the oral teachings to which Aristotle refers

in the *Physics*, starting work on the interpretation of the "esoteric teachings"[92] towards the end of 1950s. Work conducted by Thomas Alexander Szlezák from the *Universität Tübingen* and Giovanni Reale from the *Università Cattolica di Milano* from the 1980s onwards, subsequently reinforced these interpretations.

Krämer's position on the Unwritten Doctrines is largely based on Heinrich Gomperz's earlier interpretation.[93] In the same way as Gomperz thirty years before, Krämer detects in Plato's philosophy a dualistic and derivative system according to which things derive from Ideas, which themselves derive from Numbers, with Numbers depending on First Principles (the One and the Indefinite Dyad). The Platonic discussion of these First Principles, which Krämer considers to be the "things of greater value" mentioned by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, was supposedly destined for exclusively oral teachings, which were reserved for a small, elected audience.

Specifically, Krämer claims that the theories presented in the early and middle dialogues (*Republic* included) are restricted to ethical-political themes, while elements introductive to ontology are covered by those which come later (such as the *Parmenides*, *Sophist*); the real essential and ontological contents of Plato's philosophy, however, were only revealed orally at an advanced level in the Academia.[94] On this interpretation, the written dialogues are simply propaedeutic to true philosophy, as Gaiser himself had argued.

Gaiser's interpretation holds that the distinction between esoteric and exoteric teaching already was present in Plato's philosophy, as it was in that of the Pythagoreans – in particular, he argues that the dialogues (exoteric) were a mere introduction to philosophy, as emerges from the evidence of the *Second*

92 This use of the term "esoteric" excludes any reference to mysticism, and means that Plato intended those oral teachings only for the pupils in the Academia. In talking about esoteric teachings, the classic and consolidated distinction between Aristotle's written works, which are partly exoteric (intended for a large reading public, and not extant) and partly esoteric (intended for the pupils in the Lyceum and constituting almost all the extant works of Aristotle) reverberates. Nevertheless, this parallelism is not just inappropriate, but also misleading – not only because Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies are different in their intent, but mainly because the use of writing and the teaching systems of the two philosophers cannot be compared. Aristotle never criticised writing (on the contrary he used to write the contents of his lectures systematically); while Plato heavily objected to writing as a means to transmit knowledge. Schleiermacher had already used this language to point out this distinction in Plato and to remark that esoteric teachings have no authority. Cf. Mann, 2006, pp. 354–357. A clear disambiguation of the term "esoteric" in relation to Plato's teachings can be found in Szlezák, 1988, p. 484 and 1999, pp. 85–86.

93 Cf. De Vogel, 1986, pp. 13–16.

94 Krämer, 1989, pp. 211–213.

Letter.[95] Here, the author declares that the written dialogues were mere recalls of Socrates' teachings that were preliminary to real philosophy:

> Keep this in mind and take care that you have no occasion in the future to feel remorse for now exposing these doctrines unworthily. The best precaution is not to write them down, but to commit them to memory; for it is impossible that things written should not become known to others. This is why I have never written on these subjects. There is no writing of Plato's, nor will there ever be; those that are now called so come from an idealized and youthful Socrates. Farewell and heed my warning; read this letter again and again, then burn it. (*II Ep*. 314b–c)[96]

Although Gaiser's reading may appear partial, and biased by a desire to uphold a theory of Unwritten Doctrines, he nevertheless acknowledges that the critique Plato makes in regard to writing also involves orality – both are merely "reproductive," in the same way as any other means of communicating knowledge.[97] For this reason, the superiority of the oral doctrine over the dialogues does not consist in the better communicability of the teachings, or even in their contents, but in the fact that oral transmission was more systematic and scientific in comparison to dialogues. Gaiser also denies the sharp parallelism between orality and academic teachings on one side, and written teachings open to a wider public on the other; rather, he argues for an interaction between oral teachings and dialogues within the Academia, as well as the accessibility of the oral teachings to a wider public, as the *Lecture on the Good* mentioned by Aristotle presumably was.

Gaiser's interpretation, which initially appears balanced between orality and writing, ultimately favours orality in relation to the philosophical quality of the contents of Plato's teaching. In claiming that the oral teachings were more systematic and scientific, Gaiser implicitly asserts the superiority of orality over writing in terms of the quality of the concepts expressed; for this reason, despite maintaining a cautious consideration of Platonic writing, his

95 While there is a debate about the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* (as discussed in section 1.2 of this work), there are fewer doubts about the inauthenticity of the *Second Letter*. In this dissertation, the *Second Letter* is cautiously considered *probably spurious* (cf. Bluck, 1960, p. 140). In this specific section of the work, it is reported the opinion and argument by Gaiser who considered the *Second Letter* to be authentic.

96 Translated by Morrow, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

97 Gaiser, 1994, pp. 10–11.

arguments ultimately take the same position as those interpreters who believe that the esoteric, oral teachings of Plato expressed "things of greater value."

Those interpreters who worked to ascertain the nature of those "things of greater value" that might have been expressed in Plato's oral teachings, eventually came to the conclusion that all were related to the underlying existence of two fundamental principles which worked as opposite powers permeating each other. For this permeation of opposites to be possible on an ontological level, however, it was necessary to detect an analogous structure in all the existing entities.[98] This was eventually identified with mathematical principles, as the interpreters detected a binding connection between ontology and mathematics in Platonic thought.[99]

The works of Krämer and Gaiser represent decisive steps not only because they tried, for the first time, to systematically outline the contents of the presumed Unwritten Doctrines by Plato, but also – and most crucially – because, in doing so, they collated a series of documents (the direct and indirect testimonies) to support their arguments. Anyone else after them who tried to support or reject the theory of Unwritten Doctrines was therefore limited in reference to the pre-set theoretical frame already drawn by the two philologists from Tübingen.

A few decades later, Thomas Alexander Szlezák, professor and director of the "Platon-Archiv" at *Universität Tübingen*,[100] argued for the theory of Unwritten Doctrines based on alternative assumptions and using a different method to Krämer and Gaiser. Rather than focusing on the Unwritten Doctrines and their presumed content, Szlezák instead works from Plato's written dialogues to extrapolate the existence and superiority of the oral teachings over the written dialogues. The evidence that supports this line of reasoning, he argues, is that the dialogues often appear incomplete on certain points and sometimes seem to ask, through gaps and omissions, for supplementation that would have likely been found in the oral teachings.

Given that the "things of greater value" must exceed what is contained in the written text, Szlezák therefore argues that the dialogues contain fewer valuable truths, primarily due to the different quality of communication that may be transferred orally, which Plato most likely preferred for its dialectical, lively

98 Gaiser realises a detailed schema of couples of principles for each kind of relevant opposition in Plato's ontology. Ibid., p. 25.

99 Gaiser analyses in detail the relation between ontology, mathematics, and geometry in Plato in his work, first published in German in 1962 (It. trans. 1994). Cf. also Gaiser in Nikulin, 2012, pp. 83–120.

100 The previous director was Gaiser, whom Szlezák succeeded after Gaiser's death in 1988.

exchange that permitted a choice of interlocutor. This is most obvious in the final part of the *Phaedrus*, where Plato's criticism of writing not only asserts that things of greater value necessarily exceed it, but also that written materials require support (*boetheia*).[101] This support for the written word must be found outside the dialogues and can therefore reasonably be assumed to refer to what was contained in the oral teachings.

Szlezák's analysis seems to offer the most convincing criticism of writing in support of the theory of Unwritten Doctrines, largely in view of his earnest and detailed approach. Before claiming that the dialogues do not contain things of greater value, Szlezák conducts a careful reading of their contents, so as to identify the essence of Plato's philosophy in them. Although it could be claimed that he employs the same method as Schleiermacher (but ends up with the opposite conclusion), this is done intentionally, as it emerges from an appendix on the modern theory of the written dialogue towards the end of his main work on Plato.[102]

During the late eighties, Giovanni Reale, a professor at *Università Cattolica di Milano*, also became affiliated with the tradition started by Krämer and Gaiser. His works on the Unwritten Doctrines are the most detailed and systematic on the topic, and his monumental book *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone* (originally published in 1984) has been translated into several languages. This is due to the meta-philosophical operation that his investigation carried out: while he intentionally joined the tradition, at the same time he defined its name and common traits. Together, this has made him not only an exponent of the tradition, but also the one who, more so than any other, was aware of the common traits between different interpreters and of the potential impact of the innovative hermeneutic paradigm. This much is reflected in how he named his interpretative approach – not the "Unwritten Doctrines theory," but "the New Hermeneutic Paradigm."

Reale's first overt engagement with the theory of the Platonic Unwritten Doctrines came in the early eighties upon meeting Krämer, after which he translated and edited a vast work of Krämer's on the Unwritten Doctrines.[103] Following this publication, many further works on the same theme were forthcoming, and in the *Università Cattolica di Milano*, Reale subsequently established the "Centro di Ricerche di Metafisica," which surrounded him

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101 *Phaedr*. 278c5.

102 Cf. note 83.

103 The work by Krämer is *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics*, which was originally published in Italian for the first time in 1982. The book was translated, edited, and introduced by Giovanni Reale.

with a small group of students and scholars also working on the same area of research, and which generated the circumstances in which talks regarding a new hermeneutic paradigm for Platonic interpretation, created via collaboration of the Tübingen-Milan school, were raised. This alliance was made official during a meeting in Tübingen on the 3rd of September 1996, when Krämer and Szlezák met with Reale, some of his scholars, and other philosophers working in the field.[104]

The main guest in the Tübingen meeting was Hans-Georg Gadamer with whom Reale had long-term contact since 1986. On previous and successive occasions to the meeting in Tübingen,[105] Reale had tried to outline the common aspects of Gadamer's reading of Plato and "the New Hermeneutic Paradigm" for Platonic interpretation, so as to find stronger support for the theory of Unwritten Doctrines. In reality, however, this support was never fully found in Gadamer, who rarely adhered to the theories of the Tübingen-Milan school – indeed, the only valid link ever confirmed by Gadamer was the idea that Plato was in a sense anticipating the concept of the "hermeneutical circle" in the critique of writing in the final section of the *Phaedrus*. According to Reale, however, when Plato affirms that the written text is not autarchic and requires support (*boetheia*), what he means is both that oral dialectic should supplement the written text, and that, without a set of pre-concepts and pre-knowledge, it would be impossible to understand any philosophical text.[106] These two elements of the critique of writing are the link with Gadamer's own hermeneutics – as Reale pointed out, and with which Gadamer seemingly agreed.[107]

It is nevertheless a fallacy to equate Gadamer's interpretation of Plato with the interpretation of the Tübingen-Milan school; though the connections pointed out by Reale are based on the hermeneutical theories found in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, these do not reflect the philological and interpretative work that Gadamer developed around Plato's writings. The weakness of this forced connection is evident in the transcription of the conversation at the meeting in Tübingen in September 1996,[108] which seems to give the impression

104 It is also worth recalling the participation of Maurizio Migliori, Giuseppe Girgenti, Günter Figal, Klaus Oehler, Ramón Arana, Rémi Brague, Jens Halfwassen, and Dominique Richard.

105 There are interviews that Gadamer gave to Reale on the occasion of their meeting in Tübingen in 1996 and in Heidelberg in 2000.

106 Cf. *Introduzione all'edizione Bompiani* in Reale, 2010, pp. XIX–XXI.

107 Girgenti, 1998, pp. 10–11 and pp. 133–134.

108 The transcription of the meeting was edited by Giuseppe Girgenti and published in 1998 with the title *La nuova interpretazione di Platone*. The introduction of the volume was

that Gadamer did not really fit in that particular theoretical context given that he openly disagreed with the theory of the Unwritten Doctrines. In the introduction to the volume that contains this transcription, Gadamer specifically states that whilst merit for reinvigorating the contemporary debate around the interpretations of Plato may be rightfully attributed to Gaiser and Krämer, he disagreed with the deductions (about the connections between ontology, geometry, and mathematics)[109] that the two philologists made from the presumed Platonic *Lecture on the Good* mentioned by Aristotle and his disciples. Gadamer also asserts that, as an exponent of hermeneutics, there was no means by which he could be convinced that the omissions in Plato's dialogues were implicit references to an esoteric oral doctrine.[110] Whilst he did not support the theory, however, he remained willing and open to participate in the debate, in the belief that Platonic philosophy was eternally open and could not be reduced to predetermined resolutions.

In denying the tension between an oral and written theory in Plato, Gadamer acknowledges that there were indeed oral teachings given by Plato, but at the same time, defends the Schleiermachean tradition to which he belongs. On the belief that Plato was aware of the failure of definition, as no philosophical concept can be fully determined either orally or in writing,[111] Gadamer reads the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* not as an affirmation of the superiority of orality over writing, but rather as a Platonic solicitation to look for the truth through the living soul as opposed to external supports, like writing.[112]

This study has given space and consideration to the theory of Unwritten Doctrines and its main exponents, first because their works are both detailed and incisive – particularly concerning the ontological analyses carried out in order to draw a more systematic reading of Platonic philosophy – but also because these contributions represent a determinant and revolutionary phase in the contemporary history of its interpretation.[113] Above all, this consideration

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written by Gadamer and at the end of the volume there is also an interview that Gadamer released to Reale at the meeting in 1996 in Tübingen.

109 Girgenti, 1998, p. 20.

110 Ibid., p. 21 and p. 118.

111 Ibid., p. 36.

112 Ibid., p. 32.

113 A determinant feature of Reale's works which has not yet been declared, is the relevance of the epistemological ground on which he intentionally builds his theory, and consequently drags with it the entire Tübingen-Milan School. This ground is explicitly Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolution. Reale believes that Kuhn's theory explains the revolutionary compass and the obvious rejections of the New Hermeneutic Paradigm in the interpretation of Plato held by the Tübingen-Milan School. Indeed, there have been many criticisms of the New Hermeneutic Paradigm and of its epistemological ground; Reale

is necessary to highlight the reasons for disputing the theory of Unwritten Doctrines, which this work does not consider sustainable.

5 "He Will Sow Gardens of Letters for the Sake of Amusing Himself"[114]

On the basis of the evaluations given above, it seems appropriate to return to Plato's written dialogues to consider his criticism of writing in its general sense.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the *Phaedrus* offers directions on how to compose good speeches (both oral and written). First:

> I am not forcing anyone to learn how to make speeches without knowing the truth; on the contrary, my advice, for what it is worth, is to take me up only after mastering the truth. (*Phaedr*. 260d)

The structure of the speech must also be an organic and organised structure, like that of a living body, noted earlier:

> Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work. (*Phaedr*. 264c)

The fact that successful discourse must be organised like a living body is a central aspect, not only for the Platonic theory of speech-composition, but also for the structure of the dialectic method. The organic and living unity of a speech cannot simply be dismissed as a trick of the successful rhetorician; rather, the last but most significant feature of a good speech consists in a composition that is able to direct the soul.[115] This means that the *logoi* must not only be marshalled around the soul of the listener/reader (and thus around something that is alive and that gives life to a body), but also that the direction of the soul

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tries to defend his position and his use of Kuhn's theory in the final appendix of his 2010 edition, and in the appendix, there is also a collection of articles by Krämer and other scholars who defend the same position.

114 *Phaedr*. 276d.

115 "Since the nature of speech is in fact to direct the soul, whoever intends to be a rhetorician must know how many kinds of soul there are." (*Phaedr*. 271d).

(*psychagogia*) is the accomplishment of a successful dialectical method (based on *diairesis* and *synagoge*). These features are reiterated more cohesively in a later passage:

> First, you must know the truth concerning everything you are speaking or writing about; you must learn how to define each thing in itself; and, having defined it, you must know how to divide it into kinds until you reach something indivisible. Second, you must understand the nature of the soul, along the same lines; you must determine which kind of speech is appropriate to each kind of soul, prepare and arrange your speech accordingly, and offer a complex and elaborate speech to a complex soul and a simple speech to a simple one. Then, and only then, will you be able to use speech artfully, to the extent that its nature allows it to be used that way, either in order to teach or in order to persuade. This is the whole point of the argument we have been making. (*Phaedr*. 277 b–c)

Despite these criteria, however, Plato is nevertheless aware that even the best speech may never constitute a tool sufficient for expressing the truth, as every speech – whether oral or written – is always dependent on the mimetic mechanism (for the reasons clearly elucidated by the myth of Theuth and the general weakness of the *logoi* themselves). This, rather than preventing Plato from writing, causes him to redefine the context for its use. The *eide* (of justice, beauty, and the good)[116] can be grasped through a dialogical method (dialectic) and expressed by speeches (rhetoric); both dialectic and rhetoric are based on *logoi* as the only tools available to human beings, but both are *eidola*. Forced to dwell in the realm of *mimesis*, all that the philosopher can do is admit that any attempt to express the highest truths is like a joke (*paidia*).[117] This is therefore the correct way to value writing – i.e., as a simulation of sense.

This chapter has therefore offered some initial discussion into the general sense of the Platonic criticism of writing. Having offered a basic grasp of the key themes, it is now necessary to read these final observations in connection with the analyses that follow over the next two chapters. Only this will allow the Platonic critique of writing to be framed with full efficacy.

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116 For now, the *eidos* of beauty is classified equally among the other *eide*, while in chapter 3, the special status of this *eidos* is clarified.

117 *Phaedr*. 276d.

CHAPTER 2

The Critique of Orality in Plato's Works

The Platonic critique of orality is conventionally located in two areas of Plato's works: in an early, lesser-known dialogue, the *Ion*, and in some widely known passages of the *Republic*. Though, to draft a complete theory of orality in Plato, it would also be relevant to consider other dialogues which deal with the relation between philosophy and sophistry,[1] here textual analysis has been restricted to the two former dialogues, as those which contain a critique of the oral tradition as preserved and transmitted through Ancient Greek poetry. While the critique of oral speeches, such as those performed by sophists and rhetoricians, will be referred to in a few specific instances, these are not directly relevant in this work – not because their relevance is denied, but because this aspect is itself wide and nuanced enough to deserve a more detailed and deeper analysis, for which this study has no space.

Unlike the critique of writing, the critique of orality is not explicitly framed as such in Plato's dialogues and is instead often embedded in the more famous "Platonic critique of the arts." This is largely down to the precise nature of Plato's critique: the critique of orality is intended neither as a critique of the oral exchange in a general sense, nor as a critique of the oral transmission of knowledge; rather, it is a critique of the specific forms of orality employed by rhapsodes and poets.

For these reasons, this chapter exercises the same caution as was entailed in the critique of writing in the previous chapter, where generalisations and polarisations were avoided in favour of a more contextualised understanding which attempted to adhere to the original text (often quoted). Here, this same approach is supported by a recall of various broader aspects of Plato's philosophy, as well as the contemporary considerations of some cultural/anthropological aspects of Ancient Greek culture.

The first section of this chapter deals with the genealogy of the contemporary focus on oral Greek poetry and introduces the critique of some forms of orality in the *Ion*; the second and third sections deal with different aspects of the critique of orality in the *Republic*; while the final two sections gather the

1 Specifically, the *Hippias Major*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras,* and *Sophist*. The *Sophist* is still consistently involved in this work, when the theme of *mimesis* comes to a more ontological level of analysis (towards the end of this chapter and the beginning of chapter 3).

manifold elements of the critique of oral poetry in an attempt to link together some of these elements with the wider theme of the ontology of the image.

1 Orality and Vocality

It is likely that Ion never existed as a historical character and was instead a fictional character, perfectly tailored to fit the stereotype of the rhapsode. As such, the character who gives his name to the early Platonic dialogue[2] may be taken as a valuable insight into the sense of the Platonic critique of orality.

At the opening of the dialogue, Ion is presented as a successful rhapsode who is returning in glory to Athens after a poetic competition – a character for whom the reader is immediately pushed to feel admiration, not only in relation to his person, but also to the benefits of his art. The precise reasons for the invocation of this feeling are listed by a praise-giving Socrates: a rhapsode like Ion always looks beautiful and well dressed; and he spends most of the time occupied with excellent poets, especially with the divine Homer,[3] of whom he learns not only their words, but also their thought (*dianoia*).[4] With this list of praiseworthy attributes, Socrates here identifies the three main traits of the rhapsodic art: the beauty of appearances, being occupied with poets as a qualifying activity, and the ability to understand their *dianoia* as a specific skill.

This seemingly innocuous praise, with its many layers of meaning, leads Ion directly into multiple *aporiai,* which begin at the moment he proudly accepts the praise and recognises himself in these three traits. With Ion's consent, Socrates chases him through the dialogue in a well-articulated philosophical net with the themes of *techne* and *episteme* at its core, into which Ion falls as a

2 This brief but meaningful Platonic dialogue has been considered inauthentic for too many decades due to the long-lasting and influential opinion of two relevant philosophers, Goethe and Schleiermacher, who asserted that the dialogue was probably a joke or a bad imitation of a Platonic dialogue (cf. Reale, 2001, pp. 7–20). Only with a more complete understanding of Greek oral culture was it possible to correctly integrate this dialogue in the Platonic production. Considering the style and the themes dealt with, it is conventionally collocated with the dialogues of the early period – most likely after the *Euthyphro*, but before the *Hippias Major* (cf. Adorno, 2008, p. 24). Eric Havelock represents the most influential interpreter of the theory of orality in Greek culture, especially in relation to Plato's dialogues. Surprisingly enough, his main work, *Preface to Plato* (originally published in 1963), although a determinant source of information for understanding the main arguments of the *Ion*, never addresses this early dialogue, but focuses only on the *Republic* and a few other dialogues mainly used as references.

3 *Ion* 530c.

4 Ibid.

result of his early admission that he understands not only the words, but also the thoughts of the poets.

The most relevant descriptive element in the prologue of the *Ion,* however, is the ambiguous term *hermeneus,* which Socrates chooses to use when defining the role of Ion in relation to his understanding of the poets. An ambiguous term in itself, Socrates' choice of description is particularly indistinct here on account of the uses to which the term is put in the dialogue: sometimes, as is the case of this early occurrence,[5] *hermeneus* refers to the technical meaning of "literary exegete;"[6] in others, as shown later in this chapter, it can also translate to a generic meaning of "interpreter."

Before delving deeper into these central aspects of the dialogue, it is important to explicitly analyse the extent to which the definition of the rhapsode that Socrates attributes to Ion corresponds with the rhapsodic role historically. So as to understand this, and to fill the twenty-six-century gap in meaning – not only in the definition of the rhapsode, but also the distinction between the preliterate, oral-based culture slowly shifting towards literacy in which the fictitious Ion lived, and a post-literate[7] culture, like our own – a small *excursus* is now necessary.

Among the different etymological hypotheses that have been posited, the most convincing is that which claims that the term "rhapsode" originated from the verb *rhaptein* (to sew) in conjunction with *aoide* (songs).[8] According to this etymology, the rhapsode may literally be defined as "he who sews songs," however this definition alone does not give any specific details by which the rhapsodic art may be specifically distinguished. On the basis of this definition, the rhapsode does not seem very different from the poet – assimilation that is confirmed by some Platonic passages, for instance in the *Republic,* where Plato defines Homer and Hesiod, the most emblematic poets of his culture, as rhapsodes.[9] As a result, the challenge now consists in understanding why these terms and these roles were assimilable, or even interchangeable. The solution to this can be found by questioning the contemporary understanding of Ancient Greek poetry.

5 Ibid.
6 Cf. Rijksbaron, 2007, pp. 124–128; Gonzales, in Destrée and Herrmann, 2011, pp. 93–110.
7 The term "post-literate" here refers to our contemporary culture, strongly affected by communication formats that emerged with the media revolution in the sixties. The term is taken from Orville Jenkins, 2006. For the first use of this term cf. McLuhan, 1962.
8 This etymology can be attributed to Dionysius Thrax, *Techne Grammatike,* 1, 1, 8, 5. For this etymology, cf. the accurate analysis by Capuccino, 2005, pp. 263–273.
9 *Resp.* 600d.

The most established contemporary interpretation of Ancient Greek poetry focuses on the original oral-mnemonic aspect of poetry, a revolutionary tradition which has technically become known as the Harvard School, of which Eric Havelock is deemed the representative. The Harvard School tradition is the main theoretical model referred to in this chapter.

Havelock, a disciple of Milman Parry and Alfred Lord, further elaborated on the investigation into oral poetry which his colleagues had started in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Parry, on the basis of earlier theories developed by the linguist Antoine Meillet, his supervisor at the *Sorbonne*, found that the use of formulas, epithets, and certain sets of adjectives in Homeric epic was designed to support memorisation, and thus to facilitate oral transmission. The choice of words used by epic poets was therefore not primarily governed by the meaning of the terms, but rather the rhythm and the fit of the words into the hexameter structure. This theory, based on scrupulous philological work, was reinforced by the series of trips that Parry took to former Yugoslavia (initially alone, and subsequently with Lord), during which he investigated and recorded the phenomenon of traditional oral poetry as memorised and performed by South Slavic bards.[10] Parry's method of investigation – continued by Lord after Parry's premature death – that combined Greek Philology, Slavic Studies, and Anthropology was therefore highly original and, although made possible by a series of favourable circumstances,[11] was a distinctive sign of his time.

As Havelock later noticed, his own work, *Preface to Plato*, was part of a wider cultural movement that was the outcome of a general, intellectual inclination towards the role of orality and its relation to literacy in the history of human culture. This inclination was a highly contemporary one, in which Havelock points to 1963 as the watershed year:

> The year 1963 provides a convenient watershed: or perhaps better a date when a dam in the modern consciousness appears to burst, releasing a flood of startled recognitions of a host of related facts. To be sure, some notice of the role of the spoken as opposed to the written tongue goes back to the eighteenth century, and more recently field anthropologists

10 Parry, 1971, *Introduction*.

11 Parry acknowledges the relevance of the theories elaborated by Mathias Murko, Professor of Yugoslavic Poetry in Prague, for his own research (Parry 1971, p. 439). Meillet introduced Parry to Murko and, according to Adam Parry (son of Milman Parry), it is likely that Murko's work suggested to Parry the possibility of finding a living poetry tradition analogous to the Homeric one (Parry, 1971, p. XXIV).

> have compiled extensive reports of "primitive" societies (meaning nonliterate ones) which have indirectly pointed to the need for a category of human communication designated as primary orality. But the suggestion took the form of a firm concept only after 1963 […]. Within the span of twelve months or less, from some time in 1962 to the spring of 1963, in three different countries – France, Britain, and the United States – there issued from the printing presses five publications by five authors who at the time when they wrote could not have been aware of any mutual relationship. The works in question were *La Pensée Sauvage* (Lévi-Strauss), "The Consequences of Literacy" (Goody and Watt, an extended article), *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan), *Animal Species and Evolution* (Mayr), and *Preface to Plato* (Havelock).[12]

Since 1963, argues Havelock, the focus on the "oral problem" had been predominant in academic and specialised publications, a focus, mainly at an anthropological level, which lasted for at least twenty years, and which culminated with Walter Ong's work, *Orality and Literacy* (1982), that traced the modern-contemporary history of the theme.

How and why did the study of orality produce so much evidence in support of an oral theory of Ancient Greek poetry before the watershed year? In his own response, Havelock refers to the impact of the widespread use of radio, especially during the Second World War,[13] as well as the relevance of "cross-cultural collisions" produced by anthropological investigations which demonstrated the continued existence of nonliterate cultures based on orality at the time.[14] Despite identifying these determinant elements for understanding the relevance of orality on the cultural scene, however, Havelock's answer, given his position as a Greek philologist and hence as a historian of the Greek written language, most likely underestimates the impact of another approach to language that flourished before the watershed year, that had a common origin to his own tradition started under Parry.

12 Havelock, 1986, pp. 24–25.

13 In line with this are also some evaluations by McLuhan, i.e.: "Our Western values, built on the written word, have already been considerably affected by the electric media of telephone, radio, and TV. Perhaps that is the reason why many highly literate people in our time find it difficult to examine this question without getting into a moral panic. There is the further circumstance that, during his more than two thousand years of literacy, Western man has done little to study or to understand the effects of the phonetic alphabet in creating many of his basic patterns of culture. To begin now to examine the question may, therefore, seem too late." (McLuhan, 1994, p. 82).

14 Havelock, 1986.

As already noted, Parry had been a former student of Meillet's in Paris at the very end of the nineteenth century (the latter had been a Greek philologist, a Slavic and Oriental Languages philologist, and a linguist), throughout which the lectures on Comparative Grammar at the École Pratique des *Hautes Études* in Paris – held by Ferdinand de Saussure, considered the founder of Structuralism and Modern Linguistics – had been an important element.

A proficient elaboration of Saussure's theses was carried out some years later in Moscow by the talented scholar, Roman Jakobson, who subsequently became the most preeminent exponent of Structuralism. Despite multiple political misadventures, Jakobson obtained his Ph.D. at the German University of Prague in 1930 with the dissertation *Über den Versbau der serbokroatischen Volksepen*[15] (On the Verse-Making of the Serbo-Croatian Popular Epic), the same year in which Parry published an essay entitled "Studies in the Epic Technique of Verse-Making. I. Homer and the Homeric Style"[16] in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, and, a mere few years later, left for his first trip to former Yugoslavia to record the still existing oral tradition of the Serbo-Croatian popular epic. Startlingly, it seems that up until this point, the Harvard Greek philological and the structuralist movement had evolved in parallel (consciously or not – it is impossible to ascertain) around common-rooted themes; upon Parry's death in 1935, however, the two paths evolved differently. Whilst Parry's tradition was advanced by both Lord and Havelock, Jakobson began to spread the movement of Structuralism not only to another continent, but also to other subjects, well before the watershed year of 1963. Indeed, when the Nazi invasion forced him to escape first to Scandinavia and then to New York, he had already theorised the necessity of applying the structuralist method to disciplines beyond Linguistics – a theory which became a real approach in the work of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who met Jakobson for the first time in 1941, as a colleague at the *École Libre des Hautes Études* in New York.

How it was possible for research on orality, during the decades that preceded the watershed year, to encourage further elaboration on a sophisticated theory of the oral origin of Ancient Greek poetry, is therefore grounded in the specific attention to language and theory of communication that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century. Whilst only a brief account of this cultural focus has been traced here – and this partiality is in virtue of its connection with the established tradition to which Havelock belongs – this is the

15 Jakobson, 1933.

16 Parry, 1971, pp. 266–324.

favoured theoretical position of this chapter, various limits and objections notwithstanding.

The reason why many reflections on orality emerged from a structuralist analysis of language, is essentially intertwined with Anthropology. The need to analyse language and its structure had already flourished at the end of the nineteenth century, leading to the practice of language de-construction designed to find the original sense of language and communication during the twentieth. It should be noted here that the strongest interest behind the over-analyses of language does not seem to be either primarily functional or manipulative, as Linguistics and Philology do not aim forwards, but instead look back, if not always along a temporal line. Attempting to trace the roots which may lead to the genesis and origin of language, the archaeological attempt to unearth the origin of what is intrinsically human (language and communication) is also the point of connection between Linguistics and Anthropology.

In virtue of common origins and aims, the two disciplines compenetrate and support each other:

> The linguist provides the anthropologist with etymologies which permit him to establish between certain kinship terms relationships that were not immediately apparent. The anthropologist, on the other hand, can bring to the attention of the linguist customs, prescriptions and prohibitions that help him to understand the persistence of certain features of language or the instability of terms or groups of terms.[17]

This connection between Linguistics and Anthropology has been obvious in European culture since at least Rousseau,[18] with a line of continuity traceable from Rousseau to Lévi-Strauss.[19] This, Derrida terms *phonocentrism,* an

17 Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 32.

18 Some anthropological reflections on the origin of language in primitive and ancient cultures can be found in the work of Giambattista Vico (i.e., *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia, ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda*, 1710; *Scienza Nuova*, 1744). It is likely that Vico's *Scienza Nuova* influenced Condillac's theory on the origin of language, and it is known for sure that Condillac's theories (1780) influenced Rousseau. First in his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality among Men* (first published in 1754 as *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*), and then in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (first published in 1781 as *Essai sur l'origine des langues*), however, Rousseau has the distinction of theorising an evolution of human language from unarticulated primary sounds (to ask help, to grieve), to a deictic and imitative stage (metaphoric), and finally to a complex grammar structure (from which follows literacy), and all this without recurring to a theological foundation.

19 Derrida dedicates the entire second part of *Of Grammatology* to this continuity.

expression which characterises western philosophical default, otherwise known as logocentrism, which refers to the "metaphysics of phonetic writing."[20]

In simpler terms, the basis on which Anthropology builds its structure is a transition – namely the transition from nature to culture, the primary symptom of which is detected in language (which has its own phases and inner transitions), such as in the transition from orality to literacy. Contemporary attention on orality as opposed to literacy, on a linguistic as much as an anthropological level, offered a determinant input to the interpretation of Ancient Greek poetry.

The issue of the oral origin of Ancient Greek poetry was already debated in antiquity,[21] especially in regard to the Homeric poems, although this became broader and more institutionalised under the name of the *Homeric Question* during the nineteenth century.

Although some aspects of the *Question* had already been investigated in the sixteenth century, it is only during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries[22] that the investigation reached its full awareness and legitimacy, owing to a stricter philological approach taken by German philologists. The core issues of this new investigation are as follows: whether there was a unique author or multiple authors behind the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; whether the same author was behind both works; whether there was an original kernel around which the poems developed later; and whether the original kernel was first written down or was originally oral. Here is natural to notice that the issue of authorship is interdependent with the issue of writing: if the poems, or at least their central kernel, were originally written down, there is little doubt that there was a single author per poem, and through stylometry, it could be determined whether this author was the same for both works. If the origin of the poems was oral, however, there must evidently have been more than one author to transmit (in different places and at different times) the poems with slight personal variations from the original kernel, all of which contributed to refining the work until the point at which it was written down as we know it, in the age of Pisistratus.[23]

The main views on the *Question* are at least twofold: one view denies a unique authorship and a written origin of the Homeric poems; the other, unitarian view regards the poems as the works of a single author. Whilst the variations and oppositions internal to the first view on the *Homeric Question* are

20 Derrida, 1997, p. 3.

21 Ong, 1982, p. 18.

22 D'Aubignac, 1715; Vico, 1744; Wood, 1769; Rousseau, 1986 (first published in 1781 as *Essai sur l'origine des langues*); Wolf, 1876 (first published in 1795).

23 Lachmann, 1847, pp. 31–33.

many – each supported by distinct textual, linguistical, historical, and anthropological analyses – the unitarian view, by contrast – though it contains some differences and variations – is in general supported by whoever embraces a literary approach to the inquiry. This approach prefers to look backwards to before the fracture posed by the *Homeric Question* and continues to regard the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as literary masterpieces composed by a single author. The shortcomings of this latter view are many, however – for instance, its lack of any convincing explanation as to how these poems were composed, as well as its failure to consider the very limited use of writing at the time the poems were supposedly written; its primary problem, however – and one which may also be ascribed to the opposing view – is its lack of a hermeneutic perspective. As both views frequently consider Ancient Greek poetry an art product similar to modern and contemporary poetry, the outcome is that the ancient Homeric phenomenon has now been misinterpreted using modern categories:

> The assumption that in retrospect seems to have been common to all the analyst scholars, underlying all the erudition and ingenuity of their constructions, that Homeric poetry was essentially poetry like ours, only subject to peculiar distortion and development in its transmission, was more harmful finally to their work than the qualities for which they have been frequently taken to task: their dogmatic presentation of guesswork, their revealing disagreements with each other.[24]

Full exploration of the entire *Homeric Question* would require at least a chapter of discussion, but to follow up its historical development here is neither entirely relevant[25] nor beneficial for this work, as scholarship regarding the *Question* ultimately "had taken on a life of its own that overwhelmed the poetry. For the sake of scoring points against opponents, it had become scholarly practice to disparage the ancient epics themselves."[26] This is one reason to focus instead on some of the developments in relation to the *Homeric Question* that were carried out specifically by Parry and the Harvard School tradition.

Parry's approach, as has been shown, was both born of his time, but was equally revolutionary in its capacity to find another way out of the *Homeric Question*: his studies highlighted how the choice of words for Homeric verse was primarily a balancing act of pandering to the hexameter's structure

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24 Parry, 1971, p. XVIII.

25 For further information on the *Homeric Question*, see: Parry, 1971; Ong, 1982; Nagy, 1996; Morris and Powell, 1997.

26 Turner, F. M. in Morris and Powell, 1997, p. 138.

without sacrificing its meaning. This also explains its recurrent use of epithets and formulae.

These findings say something particularly important about the origin of Greek poetry: the rhythm of the words was more determinant than their semantics. As such, these words were initially put together to be heard rather than read – that is to say, they were put together to be easily uttered and captivatingly heard. For this type of oral literature, poetic composition is entirely different from the modern conception of written poetic composition, which is a discovery that primarily emerges from the investigations developed by Albert Lord in former Yugoslavia: while there is a temporal gap between composition and reading/performance in a literary poem, in the case of an orally composed work, "[…] composition and performance are two aspects of the same moment. […] An oral poem is not composed *for* but *in* performance."[27] By studying the Slavic tradition, Lord realised that illiteracy was a common feature in oral poetic traditions, as writing substitutes and then replaces the function of oral narrative songs in a literary culture.[28] The moment when the creative action of the poet and the performing action ceased to be simultaneous corresponds most likely to the moment when literacy became a social and cultural reality; when epic was institutionalised and put down in writing, the terms *aoidos*,[29] rhapsode and poet, overlapped, causing a reduction in improvisation in mimetic oral repetition. This is one of the reasons why it is not possible to read and interpret Ancient Greek poetry in the same way as modern poetry.

At this stage, a sufficient number of elements have been covered to allow for an exploration of the difference between a poet and a rhapsode in Ancient Greek poetry. At the time of Socrates, rhapsodes were professional reciters who played a key role in religious and social celebrations – a role which declined over the centuries owing to the dominance of theatre – for which reason they represented a traditional institution in Classical Greece.

27 Lord, 1971, p. 13.

28 Ibid., p. 20. The connection between illiteracy and oral culture has been widely studied not only in relation to Ancient Greek poetry and the Slavic tradition, but also in relation to native communities of Africa (cf. Finnegan, 1976 and 1988) and the Americas (Lévi-Strauss, 1961). The decision to exclude other exempla in this context does not depend on the relevance of these studies, but rather on the need to limit the study to the phenomenon in Ancient Greek poetry.

29 This is the technical Greek term to refer to the singer of poems who would compose and perform at the same time. In the Homeric poems there are frequent references to this social character who was able to compose and sing through improvisation. Cf. Parry, 1971, p. XVI.

This role was institutionalised and perceived as a social need precisely because of the oral origin of Greek poetry: before the Homeric poems were written down, the rhapsodes were the flesh and blood repositories and transmitters of those epic hexameters. It is necessary to understand here that these poetic performances were not designed purely for their entertainment value but were a means to preserve a heritage of ideas, and thus to serve as educative tools for shaping social identity. Indeed, according to Havelock's studies, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* represented social encyclopaedias[30] of an entire culture.

Rhapsodes would perform passages from epic poems in front of a vast audience, sometimes in competitions – a skill which certainly relied on memory, but this was not necessarily its main aspect. Although it seems very clear from the origin of their profession that rhapsodes had no authorship or compositional skills themselves, before the spread of writing they performed by "sewing together" different passages they had learned by heart through previous experience of listening to other rhapsodes. This process occurred by availing themselves of formulas and epithets which they then slotted together to obey the rhythm and structure of the verse, a process which, even after the writing down of traditional epic verse, rhapsodes still performed at oral performances. Writing down verses, however, allowed them to save energy on memorisation and to focus instead on the emotional bond with the audience; it is not a coincidence, therefore, that the century in which Socrates lived (and the fictitious Ion is located) was also the century in which rhetoric and sophistry flourished. Success in the rhapsodic competitions came to depend on the rhapsode's ability to captivate, move, and shake the souls of the audience. The evidence that, conversely, writing empowered some forms of orality is a further reason for not regarding orality/writing as an opposition, but rather as an anthropological shift.

Returning to discussion of the *Ion*, Socrates' praise thus far indicates that a good rhapsode was also supposed to be beautifully dressed in order to be liked by the audience; he also had his mind occupied with good poets. Was he really supposed to understand the *dianoia* of the poets, however?

Given what has been established about the rhapsodic art above, Ion is not required to understand the thoughts of the poets, but merely to repeat previously memorised words (which, in his time, were already immobilised in writing) and transmit irrational feelings through the repetition of these words. Indeed, by the time the poems were written down, the rhapsode had become a sort of literary exegete – a *hermeneus*, but never a composer himself. The *aedos* was therefore a simultaneous composer and singer of verses; the poet

30 Havelock, 1963, pp. 61–86.

a pure composer; and the rhapsode a mere reciter of what had already been composed.

Behind Socrates' praise – especially his third point on understanding the poets' thought – there is a provocation that aims to make Ion aware, in a perfect Socratic style, that the rhapsode cannot have knowledge of the thought of the poets because he cannot even give an account of his own *techne*. In fact, Ion has no *techne* at all, as having a *techne* requires having mastery of the chosen art as a whole – i.e., to know and to be able to explain what you do, how you do it, why you do it, and what its purpose is. The only thing Ion knows is that he is the most talented in talking about Homer – and only Homer – in the most beautiful way.[31]

This singularity is Ion's very point of weakness. For Socrates, if someone masters a *techne*, this requires that he master the *techne* as a whole, rather than simply a specific element of it:

> SOCRATES: [...] Anybody could understand what I meant: don't you use the same discipline throughout whenever you master the whole of a subject? Take this for discussion—painting is a subject to be mastered as a whole, isn't it? [...] Have you ever known anyone who is clever at showing what's well painted and what's not in the work of Polygnotus, but who's powerless to do that for other painters? [...]
>
> ION: Good lord no, of course not! [...]
>
> SOCRATES: And further, it is my opinion, you've never known anyone ever—not in flute-playing, not in cithara-playing, not in singing to the cithara, and not in rhapsodizing—you've never known a man who is clever at explaining Olympus or Thamyrus or Orpheus or Phemius, the rhapsode from Ithaca, but who has nothing to contribute about Ion, the rhapsode from Ephesus, and cannot tell when he does his work well and when he doesn't—you've never known a man like that.
>
> ION: I have nothing to say against you on that point, Socrates. But *this* I know about myself: I speak about Homer more beautifully than anybody else and I have lots to say; and everybody says I do it well. But about the other poets I do not. Now see what that means.

31 *Ion* 533c.

> SOCRATES: I do see, Ion, and I'm going to announce to you what I think that is. As I said earlier, that's not a subject you've mastered—speaking well about Homer; it's a divine power that moves you […] (*Ion* 532e–533c)

Indeed, the words that Ion performs orally seem very similar to the written words of Lysias' speech in the *Phaedrus*: these words are orphans as no one owns or defends them, and, as such, they are simply repeated and heard. They cannot express any knowledge (*episteme*) because whoever reproduces them has no knowledge of what they are talking about – all that these individuals possess, therefore, is a mere appearance of knowledge.

> But *you*, Ion, you're doing me wrong, if what you say is true that what enables you to praise Homer is knowledge or mastery of a profession. […] You aren't even willing to tell me what it is that you're so wonderfully clever *about*, though I've been begging you for ages. Really, you're just like Proteus, you twist up and down and take many different shapes, till finally you've escaped me. (*Ion* 542a)[32]

In this way, rhapsodising is similar to painting or acting – a painter does not have to be a craftsman in order to paint a bed, in the same way that an actor does not have to be a king to depict a king on the stage: similarly, a rhapsode does not have to be a general to speak about war strategy in Homeric poems. Socrates' intention in comparing the art of painting[33] and sculpting to the art of rhapsody, is to point out that these arts imitate: what connects them is *mimesis* (imitation/representation). What connects rhapsody to his further comparisons with flute-playing, cithara-playing, and singing, however, is rhythm. Rhythm itself supports memory and *mimesis*, something which can only be understood by considering the other half of the rhapsodic performance: the audience.

The role of the audience participating in rhapsodic recitals has not been considered to a great degree thus far, and yet the audience constitutes the other half of the performance as a genuine between the rhapsode and his public. The exchange happens through the voice uttered by the rhapsode and heard by the audience but entails a much broader involvement of the entire soul (*psyche*) and body: very often, the audience would not only listen, but actively

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32 Translated by Woodruff, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

33 Cf. also *Resp.* 198b.

participate in the performance, for instance by imitating the rhapsode through repeating the verses, or by dancing according to the rhythm of the hexameter and the music that always accompanied the performance. As such, rhapsodic recitals were a totalising experience that would release the *psyche* from anxieties and relax the body from tensions, almost as if the audience were hypnotised by rhythmic words and music. This type of performance did not only aim to preserve the culture of a commonalty through the repetition of its epos, but also to encourage pleasure and recreation ("the Muse, the voice of instruction, was also the voice of pleasure").[34]

There are two features of Ion's art to which Socrates draws attention more than once. The most significant of these is that Ion has neither a *techne*, nor the *dianoia* of the thoughts of the poets: as such, he performs his art without awareness. His knowledge is therefore neither rational nor mastered, as he cannot explain what it is. That it is, in fact, irrational, is the second point that Socrates stresses. Ion represents a mere instrument – a vehicle or a *hermeneus* (now used in the sense of intermediator) between the Muses and the audience: not only does he lack a *techne*, but he also possesses a *mania* (madness) and the ability to transmit it in such a way as to make the members of the audience *entheoi*[35] as well.

This kind of *mania* is categorised amongst other irrational activities which were part of the spiritual and religious heritage of Ancient Greek culture. Non-rational and non-conscious, these *maniai*[36] were not related to a pathological state, but instead considered a source of authority[37]: in the *Ion*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* and also the *Timaeus*, for instance, Plato refers to *mania* as something necessary for being in contact with the gods and gaining knowledge from them.[38] To engage in divination, a human being has to lose control of her/his mind so as to let the god take possession of her/his soul.[39] The most established account of this comes from the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates, in order

34 Havelock, 1963, p. 152.

35 Technically the Ancient Greek term *entheos* means "full of god," or else "filled by god." It refers to the phenomenon of divine inspiration when a prophet or a poet would lose control over his own soul and would be possessed by a god. Cf. Velardi, 1989.

36 For an accurate reflection on these forms of sacred madness, cf. Chapter III in Dodds, 1951.

37 Hatab, 1990, p. 57.

38 It is typical of ancient cultures to consider divine madness a form of knowledge, but Ancient Greek culture also gave sacred madness a privileged role in public and political life, with madness was considered the most authentic origin of knowledge. Cf. Colli, 1975, pp. 15–21.

39 *Tim.* 71e.

to strengthen the positive source of love-madness, states that "the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift of the god."[40]

This divine madness had different forms of expression among humans, including prophecies and predictions, mystic rites, purifications in which "[…] possession by the Muses, which takes a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations"[41] (the kind of *mania* that Ion expresses), and erotic madness which arose in the soul of the person who had fallen in love. Everyone possessed by divine madness (including Ion) was *entheos* – that is, they had lost control over their own soul. It is for this reason that Ion has no responsibility for what he does.

By branding poetic *mania* as a resolution in the *Ion*, Socrates denies any form of rationality to the art of rhapsody – Ion simply becomes a voice possessed by the Muses, and sings Homer not by choice, but almost by innate talent, a *theia moira*[42] (divine fate). Given the role and the type of performance in Ancient Greek poetry, it is deducible that the voice of the rhapsode has a sensorial surplus if compared to the contemporary idea of orality: it is more material and physical because it has a rhythm and a melody which are specific traits of identity and bearers of a meaning that is not necessarily rational.[43]

Hearing, especially before the spread of literacy, was the predominant sense in Ancient Greek culture, which only later evolved to depend on vision with the introduction of the alphabet.[44] As such, Archaic Greece is oral or vocal-based, in a way that is very difficult to imagine for a contemporary reader. It is only possible to accept the complete lack of responsibility and resolute passivity of the rhapsode Ion, however, with some understanding of the kind of psychology (literally, the structure of the soul) this engendered: a Greek poet had no precise idea of the self, and thus completely lacked any kind of self-consciousness. Some vocal messages, accompanied and emphasised by the rhythm of music, were stored passively and would be recalled in performances with the same passivity, almost in a state of trance, which, as some studies have

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40 *Phaedr.* 244a.

41 *Phaedr.* 245a.

42 *Ion* 534c. *Theia moira* (literally "divine partition") is the very same terminology that Plato attributes to Socrates when the latter tries to explain what that "voice" is that pushes him to speak and act rightly, cf. *Apol.* 33c. Jean-Luc Nancy insists on the vocal aspect of the rhapsodic activity, considering it a partition of the divine voice itself, as if the personal voice represents the personal identity, the individual soul of each human being. Cf. Nancy, 1993, pp. 65 ff.

43 Cf. the analyses developed by Cavarero, 2003.

44 Most likely spread by the mid-eight century BCE. Cf. Havelock, 1986, p. 63.

convincingly demonstrated, entailed auditory hallucinations[45] (which would work like visual hallucinations work nowadays) in which self-identity would be better identified with the personal voice rather than with self-consciousness.

The opposition to orality that Plato expressed through Socrates' hunting of the rhapsode is a partial criticism of this vocal-based *psyche*. With the "new-born" concept of philosophy which represented a reaction against the archaic culture of vocality, irrationality, and passivity, Socrates' quest for truth can therefore not accept any ready-made, impersonal, uncontrollable, and especially easy-to-repeat *logoi*. On his view, the soul, which is the tool of the philosopher, must be readable, tidied up, and protected from any overwhelming irrationality.

> But to see the soul as it is in truth, we must not study it as it is while it is maimed by its association with the body and other evils – which is what we were doing earlier – but as it is in its pure state, that's how we should study the soul, thoroughly and by means of logical reasoning. We'll then find that it is a much finer thing than we thought and that we can see justice and injustice as well as all the other things we've discussed far more clearly. What we've said about the soul is true of it as it appears at present. But the condition in which we've studied it is like that of the sea god Glaucus, whose primary nature can't easily be made out by those who catch glimpses of him. Some of the original parts have been broken off, others have been crushed, and his whole body has been maimed by the waves and by the shells, seaweeds, and stones that have attached themselves to him, so that he looks more like a wild animal than his natural self. The soul, too, is in a similar condition when we study it, beset by many evils. (*Resp*. 611b–d)

2 Myth and Philosophy

If, on the one hand, *logos* – rational reasoning – and *dialogos* (especially that which occurs within the soul) are the tools and the gifts of the philosopher, performance and *mania* (specifically the form which comes from the Muses), on the other hand, are the tools and gifts of the poet. The philosopher detects and sets this opposition on the battlefield of the soul, and yet the poet is unaware

45 With this term Julian Jaynes refers to the "auditory hallucinations" that were typical of prophets and god-possessed human beings, cf. Jaynes, 1976, pp. 340–341.

of it; he is not cognisant of the readability of his soul, and he speaks and hears material words without possessing inner dialogues made from immaterial words as the philosopher does. In addition, the poet is not in control of his soul, but in the service of the Muses, the channel of poetic madness. The philosopher, by contrast, knows his own soul and disciplines it to serve the *logos*.

Plato can be considered the first author to explicitly set out the opposition between myth and philosophy, identifying myth with the contents of the oral tradition, such that he appears to consider the poet himself a myth-maker.[46] Indeed, the differences between philosopher and poet are multiple and widely expressed by Plato throughout his dialogues, and yet one crucial difference, which is closely related to the shift from an oral culture to a literate culture, remains blurred: for the poet, memory is a goddess; for the philosopher, it is coincident with true knowledge.

The exercise of memorisation, as it is understood nowadays, is a phenomenon that appeared among literate intellectuals in Greece at the beginning of the fourth century BCE,[47] as a necessary technique for the exercise of rhetoric. In Archaic Greece, this concept had been personified as the goddess Mnemosyne (literally, remembrance), who did not have any direct communication with the poet but availed herself of a more sophisticated system of communication – namely, the poetic *mania* granted in various ways via the intercession of different Muses. Mnemosyne thus communicated with the poets through the Muses, with the Muses singing to the audience through the voice of the poet. The poets' real gift, therefore, was not to sing, but rather to hear the voice of the Muses during a maniacal trance.

The nine sisters known as Muses retain the heritage of Mnemosyne, as her daughters, and may be considered the guardians of social memory, a form of remembrance preserved and transmitted via spoken speech.[48] Being almost a choir, the role of their leader was taken by Apollo, the god of Poetry, though each specialised in different artistic disciplines representative of the archaic, oral-based culture in which they operated. In conventional order, they are as follows: Cleio (Celebrator) represented History; Euterpe (Delighter) represented Lyric Poetry; Thaleia (Luxuriator) represented Comedy; Melpomene (Song Player) represented Tragedy; Terpsichore (Dance-Delighter) represented Choral Lyric and Dance; Erato (Enrapturer) represented Erotic Poetry; Polyhymnia (Hymnal Player) represented Ritual Dance and Sacred Singing; Urania

46 Naddaf, G. in Wians, 2009, pp. 101–102.
47 Havelock, 1986, p. 80.
48 Ibid., p. 79.

(Heaven Dweller) represented Astrology; Calliope (Fair-Speaker) represented Eulogy.

Emblematic of oral culture, the preservation of social memory and the role of the Muses only changed with the progressive introduction of literacy in Greek culture, when their influence on poets became inspirational rather than functional. Indeed, at the beginning of any Greek epic poem, the poet had traditionally addressed the Muses by asking them to sing something to him that he himself was then able to sing to his audience. Almost as if by searching for the voices of the Muses, the poet searched for the inner voice of memory which would help him to sing. With the support of writing, however, poets did not need to hear this voice as much as they had done in the past – words were noted down and visible. The poets and rhapsodes nevertheless continued to invoke the Muses at least as an inspirational ritual.

The epic poet able to most clearly categorise what the voices of the Muses told him, was Hesiod, who, in the Proem of his *Theogony*, upon invoking the Muses for inspiration, states that: "They sing the laws [*nomoi*] of all and the ways [*ethe*] of all/ even of the immortals they do celebrate" alongside a depiction of all the relevant information about the cultural role of the nine sisters.[49] The terms *laws* and *ways*, both of which later shifted in meaning from their original concrete use in archaic Greek culture to their more abstract significance in philosophy, here imply usage and customs before they were written down (*nomoi*, laws),[50] or personal behaviour patterns or even personal character (*ethe*, ways – etymologically connected to the haunt of an animal).[51]

The striking aspect of Hesiod's declaration does not consist in revealing the contents of the Muses' songs, but rather in the juxtaposition of human laws and ways with those of the immortals. As a characterising trait of epos, this is one of the primary points of criticism in the Platonic opposition to poetry and the imitative arts in general, with Plato clearly stating in the *Republic* that "the most serious charge against imitation [is], namely, that with a few rare exceptions it is able to corrupt even decent people, for that's surely an altogether terrible thing."[52] This corruption occurs owing to a double imitation: the poet's compositions imitate the behaviour of heroes and gods, making them vulnerable to suffering and grief; human beings, upon hearing his compositions, subsequently take heroes and gods as exempla of virtue and thus end up imitating their psychological weaknesses. Heroes and gods being represented

49 Hesiod, *Theogony*, vv. 64–68.
50 Havelock, 1963, p. 63.
51 Ibid.
52 *Resp.* 605c.

with human psychological features in epos is wrong, according to Plato, as the only way for a man to become just is to make himself godlike, but the image of the gods in the epos is completely anthropomorphised. Gods and heroes in the epos are easily inclined towards the weakest (the irrational/emotional) part of their soul, which is precisely the part affected by traditional Greek poetry.

Whilst the problematic aspects that led Plato to oppose this poetic world are many, all converge in the theme of the safeguarding and ownership of the soul. This is explicitly demonstrated in the *Republic*, the dialogue *par excellence* for looking at the structure of the soul in relation to the structure of the ideal city in which justice reigns, where the role of arts – and specifically the role of the poet in the city, given the dangerous effects of his art on the soul – are thoroughly questioned:

> Then let this be our defence – now that we've returned to the topic of poetry – that, in view of its nature, we had reason to banish it from the city earlier, for our argument compelled us to do so. But in case we are charged with a certain harshness and lack of sophistication, let's also tell poetry that there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy [...] (*Resp.* 605c)

Before trying to understand the social and political reasons for this opposition, it is worthwhile lingering on some features of archaic Greek, oral-based poetry, and its slow transition towards literacy.

The ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, as previously noted, is grounded in the prevalence of irrational elements in poetic performance[53] – rhythm, manic inspiration, dance, and choral dispossession – which were the features of an oral-based transmission of knowledge. Indeed, it was not only the manner of performance of poetry that fed the irrational part of the soul, but also its contents which were dangerous for their effect on the human soul, as well as for their intrinsically deceptive ontological nature.

Indeed, it is this ontological focus that is probably the most relevant aspect to keep in mind when attempting to rebalance the dichotomy between orality and writing in Plato, which, although addressed by Havelock, is nevertheless neglected in favour of his focus on poetic performance and the social role of Greek poetry as connected under the category of oral culture. This is perfectly

53 This is the Platonic position which, although it sounds rather assertive, should not be taken as a commonly accepted truth. Glenn Most analyses the genealogy of this quarrel and questions its Platonic assertiveness in "What Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry?" in Destrée and Herrmann, 2011, pp. 1–20.

in line with the tradition to which Havelock belongs, although it could be argued that this contribution nevertheless broadened the theme of oral culture to incorporate more philosophical aspects.

From a philosophical point of view, the transition from orality to literacy did not reflect a mere change in the technology of communication, but a deeper shift in value system from myth to philosophy, which was probably one of the contingent elements in determining the birth of so-called western philosophy.

This shift is centred around the self-perception of the soul by the poet, and a concept of identity and authorship which was lacking in the oral culture.[54] In epic, the poet, in his capacity as performer and *hermeneus*, is present as a role rather than a specific identity. The lack of the concept of subject, as a pivot around which experience is organised and filtered, meant that every human being was part of a social, cultural, spiritual, and natural system, and thus that they would not perceive herself/himself as an isolated self – precisely the opposite to philosophy, where the concept of self is preeminent. This shift is represented in one of the revolutions commonly attributed to Socrates, as the conventional initiator of western philosophy, which consisted in bringing to completion a progressive change in the meaning of the term *psyche*.

> In brief, instead of signifying a man's ghost or wraith, or a man's breath or his life blood, a thing devoid of sense and self-consciousness, it came to mean "the ghost that thinks," that is capable both of moral decision and of scientific cognition, and is the seat of moral responsibility, something infinitely precious, an essence unique in the whole realm of nature.[55]

This distance and reversal, which is the essential difference between mythology and philosophy, is also made evident in other conceptual aspects typical of myth that shifted with the advent of philosophy: whereas myth focuses on specific exempla and situations, full of concrete details, philosophy, by contrast, abstracts from concreteness to reach a general concept. In the same way, myth operates on the assumption that there is no difference in ontological value between reality and imagination, as they are both parts of the same lived experience; philosophy, on the other hand, constantly seeks to demarcate a fixed line between what is real and what is an illusion. At its core, however, the affirmation of the *psyche* as self-consciousness represents a distinction in philosophy's way of thinking – that is, active and rational control over the given world caused by the affirmation of the subject in opposition to an object.

54 Cf. Havelock, 1986, pp. 20–21.
55 Havelock, 1963, p. 197.

Myth, meanwhile, is taken a-critically, with its meaning emerging without control, in the same way as dreams or hallucinations:

> Mythical thought requires receptivity; logic cannot exist without activity. Logic does not materialize until man has become cognizant of the energy within him, and the individuality of his mind. Logical thought is unimpaired wakefulness; mythical thinking borders upon the dream, in which images and ideas float by without being controlled by the will.[56]

The process of development from mythical thought to philosophy was not straight or clear – whilst those who are conventionally considered the first philosophers (the Preplatonics)[57] moved their attention from mythological stories and characters to nature, *physis*, they nevertheless continued to refer to mythical elements and categories (such as the relation of opposites, and the materiality and unifying role of the *arche*). Even later, when philosophy became more conceptual and abstract under Plato, the presence of myths remained strong, albeit as references to stories and characters designed to exemplify the immaterial essence of the philosophical *logos*. In Plato in particular, myth is employed rather like a crucible of allegories in which deeper values, religious rituals, and social meaning may be found, albeit where myth ceases to be the message of the communication, and is instead silenced and visual, like a blurred past internalised and passively memorised. It is for this reason that it becomes evident that there is, in fact, no shift from myth to philosophy, but rather a shift *through myth to philosophy*.[58]

It is in this same way that the relationship between writing and orality may be construed: there is no shift from orality to writing, but *through* orality *to* writing, in which Plato may be considered the main representative, given that the transition gained both awareness and intentionality under his cultural project. Indeed, it is within this project that Plato invented a new literary genre, the written (oral) dialogue, which he termed "philosophy,"[59] after which the genre veered quickly towards a more systematic style whereby all oral residues (dialogues) were sublimated in the dialectical movement. This is the "philosophical treatise," of which Aristotle was the best representative, and which

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56 Snell, 1953, p. 224.

57 Havelock deliberately decides to use the term "Preplatonics" instead of "Presocratics." Although – as Havelock himself recognises – since at least Zeller (1846), the term "Presocratic" has become institutionalised, in this work Havelock's amendment is preferred for chronological and theoretical reasons. Cf. Havelock, 1996, pp. 15–22.

58 Expression taken from Hatab, 1990, p. 199.

59 Cf. Colli, 1975, p. 109.

remains the primary philosophical genre. Philosophy therefore flourished on the basis of literacy – indeed it seems impossible to refer to philosophy without its literary substratum, and it is for this reason that the entirety of Greek mythical heritage has been confined to the tradition of oral poetry in opposition to philosophy, as conceived by Plato.

This deeply rooted opposition reached its dramatic peak with Socrates' death sentence. Whilst Plato, albeit living the risks of philosophy himself by opening the Academy and through his misadventures in Syracuse, was in some ways protected by dialogue-writing, Socrates was the living example of a new way of thinking expressed orally that was perceived as threatening. This new way of teaching was a way of raising questions, thereby instigating doubt in that new territory of self-reflection called *psyche*. The main charge against him was thus that his teachings corrupted young people, and indeed, the main things called into question by a logical attack were consolidated convictions, established traditions, and appearances (features upon which the world of traditional myth was based), which dialectic and rationality aimed to dismantle for their passivity in favour of a search for a truth that had not been ready-made by tradition. The awakening of the individual *psyche*, upon which this centred, was considered threatening on a political level – not only because anything could be called into question, but also because the inner truth of the individual could become more relevant than the established institutions of the community. Critical thinking was thereby perceived as a challenge to social stability.

It was on the same charges, now employed in the opposite direction, that Plato formulated one of the main criticisms against poetry (the melting pot of the mythological heritage) – namely, that it corrupted young people by offering bad examples which, by showing human beings and gods easily inclined towards emotions and irrational behaviours, fed the worst part of the human soul. For Plato, young people were the next *politai* (citizens) in charge of the well-being of the city and must therefore become good citizens, this meant that they were required to be awake and aware through a healthy control over their souls; in attacking or defending philosophy, the education of the young was what was at stake.

From the moment the soul was silhouetted with clarity through attentive philosophical work, the concept of identity became the pivot of human experience; the mythical world thus faded away, but never entirely disappeared.

3 The Arts and the City

In the *Republic*, the criticism of oral culture, specifically in its poetic guise, begins in Book II and continues into Book III, later remerging, in a changed

and revised form, in Book X. Over the course of this discussion, Plato's position on poetry changes in its disfavour, a change which, typical of the *Republic*, has most frequently been addressed through the argument that the dialogue is a fragmentary work. The reason for this fragmentation is cited as the length of the work, which was most likely composed in a fragmented way, over an extended period of time.[60] Most studies support this theory of fragmentation, which is valid and functional for a general reading of the dialogue, however, in this context, this study argues that the reasons for such interruptions and changes are in fact internal, and rely on the dialectical structure of the work itself.[61] It is what is discussed in the long gap between the first and the last occurrence of poetry that explains Plato's change in position.

In the *Republic,* the discussion of the arts occurs in connection with a discourse on the soul, which in turn is related to the theoretical projection of an ideal city in which justice reigns (justice being the original theme of the dialogue). Within the wider frame of the whole dialogue, a just city is one in which just citizens live, although this is only possible if they receive a just education.

When Plato first introduces the theme of poetry in Book II, the context of discussion is the definition of justice. In an exchange that occurs mainly between Socrates and Glaucon, Adeimantus nevertheless intervenes to cite the common opinion on justice, with reference to the ancient poets (Homer and Hesiod): according to their teachings, it is ultimately useless to act according to justice, because the gods so often reward the unjust and punish the just. In addition, an unjust action may be exculpated following the performance of ancient rituals and sacrifices to purify and absolve the soul. Seemingly, therefore, there is little benefit in being just. This assertion brings up a radical question: why should human beings pursue a strenuous but unrewarding aim such as justice?[62]

Through Adeimantus' intervention, Plato delineates the ancient heritage of the poetic tradition to demonstrate that it does not allow for the possibility of justice – instead, it attempts to persuade its audience that injustice is better and easier to live with. This is precisely what is dangerous for the young citizens who are in the process of shaping their souls, and so, confronted with this risk, Socrates is called upon to give good reasons why justice is preferable to injustice, and – in a discussion directly derivative from this – why ancient poetry should not be part of the education of young citizens.

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60 Cf. Vegetti, 2008, pp. 7–21.

61 For a complete and coherent account of the theme of *mimesis* throughout the entire *Republic,* cf. Belfiore, 1984, pp. 121–146.

62 *Resp.* 366b ff.

> The investigation we're undertaking is not an easy one but requires keen eyesight. Therefore, since we aren't clever people, we should adopt the method of investigation that we'd use if, lacking keen eyesight, we were told to read small letters from a distance and then noticed that the same letters existed elsewhere in a larger size and on a larger surface. We'd consider it a godsend, I think, to be allowed to read the larger ones first and then to examine the smaller ones, to see whether they really are the same.
>
> "That's certainly true," said Adeimantus, "but how is this case similar to our investigation of justice?"
>
> I'll tell you. We say, don't we, that there is the justice of a single man and also the justice of a whole city? [...] Perhaps, then, there is more justice in the larger thing, and it will be easier to learn what it is. So, if you're willing, let's first find out what sort of thing justice is in a city and afterwards look for it in the individual, observing the ways in which the smaller is similar to the larger. That seems fine to me. If we could watch a city coming to be in theory, wouldn't we also see its justice coming to be, and its injustice as well? Probably so. And when that process is completed, we can hope to find what we are looking for more easily?
>
> [...] I think a city comes to be because none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things. [...] And because people need many things, and because one person calls on a second out of one need and on a third out of a different need, many people gather in a single place to live together as partners and helpers. And such a settlement is called a city. Isn't that so? [...] And if they share things with one another, giving and taking, they do so because each believes that this is better for himself?
>
> [...] Come, then, let's create a city in theory from its beginnings. And it's our needs, it seems, that will create it." (*Resp*. 368b–369c)

This method of comparison consists in recognising, through the magnifier of a macrocosm, a similar structure in a microcosm. Having established an isomorphism between the human soul and city government, Socrates uses this parallel to shift his philosophical focus from justice to political theory, to put forward the theoretical bases on which he projects the foundation of a beautiful city (Kallipolis) in the subsequent books of the *Republic*. This is particularly relevant in this context because it is here that Socrates repeatedly asserts that there is no space for poetry in such a political project. Within the essential structure of a city – i.e., one which covers only essential needs – poetry is not involved; only as the city grows beyond its limits, is there a possibility that it may arise:

> Then we must enlarge our city, for the healthy one is no longer adequate. We must increase it in size and fill it with a multitude of things that go beyond what is necessary for a city – hunters, for example, and artists or imitators, many of whom work with shapes and colours, many with music. And there'll be poets and their assistants, actors, choral dancers, contractors, and makers of all kinds of devices, including, among other things, those needed for the adornment of women. And so we'll need more servants, too. Or don't you think that we'll need tutors, wet nurses, nannies, beauticians, barbers, chefs, cooks, and swineherds? We didn't need any of these in our earlier city, but we'll need them in this one. (*Resp.* 373a–c)

The poets are listed explicitly in this list of unnecessary adornments that may be required in a larger city and bearing in mind the parallelism between city and soul, it may therefore be implicitly assumed that poetry features as part of the unnecessary elements of the soul, if it too gets more than it needs. Though this is not explicitly stated, the way Socrates shifts back from the city to the soul is pointed: if the poets were an unnecessary adornment for the city, it may be deduced that they are no good for the soul either.

Considering how the city has grown to the degree that it requires an army for the defence of all its needs, Socrates explains that the army must be composed of professional guardians who are in possession of certain physical dispositions by nature, such as fast reactions and strength (spiritedness, in a single word). Although their physical disposition must be spirited, however, their souls should not be of the same disposition, lest they end up acting savagely both among themselves and towards their own citizens.[63] How, therefore, may an army of spirited guardians, who are also gentle and philosophical when required, be produced?[64]

The answer Socrates offers is education. The question of what this education consists of, however, causes him to return to the exploration of the soul and the goal of the original enquiry, which was the definition of justice, leaving aside for a moment, the question of the foundation of the beautiful city. It is here that Socrates first begins to explicitly lay out his arguments for why ancient poetry should not be part of the education of young citizens. Though at first, he posits a model of education based on music and poetry for the soul, and on physical exercise for the body, on reflection, Socrates rejects poetry,

63 *Resp.* 375b.

64 To distinguish between friends and enemies means being able to distinguish between right and wrong, which is a specific task of the philosopher.

given its derivation from the stories told by the ancient (epic) oral tradition (primarily Homer and Hesiod). The problem with these stories, he claims, is that by being false and improperly told, they compromise the education of the youngest:

> Telling the greatest falsehood about the most important things doesn't make a fine story […] But even if it were true, it should be passed over in silence, not told to foolish young people. The young can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable. For these reasons, then, we should probably take the utmost care to ensure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones for them to hear. (*Resp.* 377e–378e)

The circular structure, detailed motivations, and exempla offered towards the end of Book II reinforce its initial criticism of ancient poetry: the poets tell false stories about gods and heroes, thereby instigating and promoting injustice, something which constitutes a significant risk if it impacts on the souls of young citizens. Furthermore, within this criticism is contained a more implicit aspect that links it with the criticism of poetry which follows in Book III – namely the connection between false stories and false images that recurs across the *Republic*.

The first time this connection occurs, it is meant literally rather than metaphorically, for which reason it must be considered a genuine and intentional link, and not merely rhetorical. Here Socrates, while articulating his criticism of storytelling, compares a false story, which does not represent things as they are, to a bad painting;[65] a few passages later, when talking about falsehood in a more ontological sense, he then states that falsehood in words is not a complete falsehood, but counts as an imitation, or an image:

> Surely, as I said just now, this would be most correctly called true falsehood-ignorance in the soul of someone who has been told a falsehood. Falsehood in words is a kind of *imitation*[66] of this affection in the soul, an image of it that comes into being after it and is not a pure falsehood. (*Resp.* 383b)

65 *Resp.* 377e.
66 Italics are mine.

This is again related to deception in its final occurrence in Book II: the false stories told by ancient poets cannot be trusted in their representation of the gods, because a god does not deceive by means of images, words or signs.

It must be noted here that the connection between *logos* and *eidos* which has been established throughout Book II has a specific name which is revealed *en passant*: *mimesis* (imitation, representation). This should come as little surprise – *mimesis* played this same connecting role in the critique of writing, and represents a clear point of connection between this criticism and that of orality, which converge under the wider theme of the ontology of the image, as is shown at the end of this chapter.

In Book III of the *Republic*, the theme of *mimesis* continues explicitly. Socrates again reasserts the rejection of all the poetic stories which contain falsehoods, but now proposes to leave the discussion about the content (*logos*) of the stories in favour of focusing instead on the style (*lexis*) in which these are told.[67] Here, he enumerates three stylistic devices that the poets use for storytelling: narration (*diegesis*), when the poet uses his own voice to tell a story; imitation (*mimesis*), when he narrates through the voice of the characters – the typical style of tragedy and comedy; and a combination of the two previous styles, which is the typical style of epos.

After making these distinctions, Socrates gets straight to the point of this stylistic analysis, which consists of another rejection of *mimesis*: *mimesis*, as a stylistic device in which *logos* and *eidos* are connected, is dangerous in the city because it allows for the possibility of multiplicity – i.e., a person can act as if she/he is both herself/himself and someone else at the same time, by means of imitation rather than any real knowledge. In addition to this, a multiplicity of roles is not suitable for the constitution (*politeia*) of the just city which is being enumerated, where everyone has a precise role with only one specific job.[68] This latter reason seems too abstract to exclude poetry from the beautiful city, but becomes more concrete when applied to the educative system, especially that of the guardians, which is at stake throughout Books II and III.

This new formulation of the criticism may leave contemporary readers astonished – not only for its exclusion of poetry from the educative system, but also because the work in which Plato articulates this criticism is itself written in the mimetic style that is banished from the city. Through Socrates' voice, Plato seems to banish his own dialogues (and indeed any form of poetry) from

67 *Resp.* 392c.
68 *Resp.* 397e.

the city. There appear, however, some exceptions within the mimetic style that are acceptable:

> It seems, then, that if a man, who through clever training can become anything and imitate anything, should arrive in our city, wanting to give a performance of his poems, we should bow down before him as someone holy, wonderful, and pleasing, but we should tell him that there is no one like him in our city and that it isn't lawful for there to be. We should pour myrrh on his head, crown him with wreaths, and send him away to another city. But, for our own good, we ourselves should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller, one who would imitate the speech of a decent person and who would tell his stories in accordance with the patterns we laid down when we first undertook the education of our soldiers. (*Resp*. 398a–b)

According to this passage, one element of poetic art is worth saving – namely, that its power of imitation allows it to imitate good characters who may function as exempla for the younger citizens. It is most likely this role that is imagined for Plato's own philosophical dialogues.

Later on, however, in the tenth and final book of the *Republic*, Plato's position becomes harsher. The careful stylistic distinction (between *diegesis* and *mimesis*) disappears, with the poetic art as a whole being condemned as mimetic:

> [...] all such poetry is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug to counteract it. (*Resp*. 595b)

Poets may only present things by their appearances, not in their truth; the only means to counteract this poetic spell is knowledge of things as they really are – and not as they seem. For this reason, Socrates decides to reject the verses of the beloved Homer, as, ultimately, there can be no genuine exceptions within the mimetic style, for no man is more honourable than the truth.[69] From this moment on, Socrates and Glaucon engage in a rigorous philosophical analysis of *mimesis*.

Through the famous example of the table and the bed, Socrates and Glaucon are able to distinguish three ontological degrees, corresponding to three different activities. This distinction makes possible the acknowledgement of

69 *Resp.* 595c.

the three steps that lead from truth to appearance through *mimesis*: first is the generation of an idea which comes directly from the god; then, the production of an object that the craftsman creates by looking to the idea of it; and finally, the visual representation of that object as painted by an artist. Throughout, this series of transitions is an anti-climax in terms of ontological value, which is aggravated by the multiplicity that each implies – only the idea is one and whole, while both the objects created by the craftsman and the images represented by the painter – the latter even more so – may be numerous. This three-step transition thus not only diminishes the value of the original idea by decreasing its ontological value, but also by the dispersion that the ease of multiplication of the image allows.

This intuitive tripartite scheme is simplified through concrete examples – beds and tables are, if trivial, quite common – which, on the one hand, makes the concept easy to grasp, but equally makes it vulnerable to philosophical criticisms. The chief of these criticisms addresses the reason why the painter cannot look at the idea of the bed himself and paint it from that, rather than looking at the material bed created by the carpenter.[70] The answer to this question, it seems, is overshadowed by the surprising simplicity of the "furniture comparison." The question itself is generated by the extreme simplification that Plato makes from Book VI, where a theory of Ideas is sketched,[71] to Book X, where he seems to betray his previous theorisation.

As is often the case in Plato's work, metaphors, myths, poetic quotations, and digressions are employed as a means to simplify a complex abstract argument for the particular interlocutor in question, something which often throws the argument into a world of materiality that has to be taken analogically rather than literally. Indeed, what seems to matter the most in Plato is the geometry of the argument,[72] that is, its intrinsic inner structure which the reader is required to look for in the metaphors and narrations he uses, so as to find a resemblance to the original philosophical thought. This does not diminish the

70 Cf. Sallis, 2015.

71 In Book VI of the *Republic*, common objects do not seem to have ideas from which these supposedly derive; at this stage of the dialogue, ideas exist only for values and abstract entities, not for common objects.

72 Cf. the *Timaeus*, where the transition between ideal world and material world is made more accessible thanks to the presence of geometrical shapes that work as intermediaries. This is expressed particularly in the act of creation of the world by the demiurge: "And he gave it a shape appropriate to the kind of thing it was. The appropriate shape for that living thing that is to contain within itself all the living things would be the one which embraces within itself all the shapes there are. Hence he gave it a round shape, the form of a sphere, with its centre equidistant from its extremes in all directions." (*Tim.* 33b).

value of the suggestions that may come from concrete details, but the device of analogy is not intended to function as a mirroring resemblance – indeed, as a *mimesis* – but rather as a parallel restructuring. Certainly, if taken literally, it is not easy to understand why the painter cannot look to the original idea of the bed, but in truth, something like "the idea of the bed" does not even exist: in fact, what the craftsman looks at is the structure of the *techne* which allows him to create a bed – in other words, it is to the structure and organisation of practical knowledge that is required to build a bed or table that he looks. In Plato's view, however, the artist does not have a *techne*, and thus may only reproduce phantoms of material things, without having the knowledge of how these things really are in their inner structure and organisation. He does not spend time explaining this because there is another point to stress here: the painter, in the same way as the poet, is not able to look at the *eidos* of the things; he may look only at the *eidola* and imitate them. This sentiment, clearly expressed in the dialogue, is sufficient to answer the question above.

> Then imitation is far removed from the truth, for it touches only a small part of each thing and a part that is itself only an image. And that, it seems, is why it can produce everything. For example, we say that a painter can paint a cobbler, a carpenter, or any other craftsman, even though he knows nothing about these crafts. Nevertheless, if he is a good painter and displays his painting of a carpenter at a distance, he can deceive children and foolish people into thinking that it is truly a carpenter. (*Resp*. 598b–c)

The entire discourse on *mimesis* in Books II, III, and X of the *Republic* can in essence be reduced to the three features of the mimetic mechanism listed in the previous chapter: first, *mimesis* is an imitative form of reproduction strictly connected to the paradigm of visual image; second, *mimesis* is not able to produce, but merely *reproduce*; third, the copy which emerges from the mimetic reproduction is false. As previously noted, the criticism of *mimesis* may be considered the point of connection between the criticism of orality and the criticism of writing in Plato.

To honour the complete structure of Plato's dialogue and to address those criticisms about the fragmentary nature of the *Republic*, it is still worth taking the time to understand what happens in between the position held by Plato in Books II and III on poetry and the arts, and the revised position in Book X.

The return to the theme of poetry in Book X happens unexpectedly, not least because Socrates had already taken a seemingly definitive position on it in Book III. If in Book III some aspect of imitative poetry was accepted in the

just city, this is entirely rejected in Book X. What has changed from Book III to Book X is not simply Plato's conception of poetry; rather, it is the city itself and consequently – in virtue of the isomorphism already established – the soul too.

Books II to IV address Socrates' attempt to found Kallipolis, the just city: in Book IV, for instance, an outline is provided which shows the structure of the soul as tripartite (*epithymetikon* = desiderative; *thymoeides* = passionate; *logistikon* = rational), corresponding to the tripartite structure of the classes in the city (bronze class = money-maker; silver class = auxiliary; gold class = guardians), structured in a specific and analytic way both for the city and human beings. It must be noted that when the critique of poetry was first articulated in Book III, there was no definite psychology to which to apply the critique itself, something which in itself provided a good reason to return to the theme of poetry, so as to be availed of a more articulate theory of the soul. That Socrates does return to poetry with this tripartite psychology, however, is due to the fact that, as the dialogue progresses, this tripartite scheme becomes increasingly challenged by limits and contradictions, such that it ceases to be adequate to describe the soul and the city. From Book V to VII, for instance, Socrates is forced into a long diversion because Polemarchus asks him to elaborate on the sexual regulation in Kallipolis; only after this break, through which Socrates revises and integrates his previous account, is it possible, in Book VIII, to find a more complete articulation of tripartite psychology – by Book IX, however, Socrates acknowledges that human beings act with the soul as a whole, and not by means of its separate parts.[73]

Socrates has already admitted in Book IV[74] that there are two ways of articulating the soul – the first way, expressed in Book IV itself, is analytical – a path which is both adequate and logical – but there is also a longer road. This longer road is the new account of the soul, which is given in Books VIII and IX, and which still respects the tripartition of Book IV, but now also includes *eros*. Only by articulating human psychology in this way, is Socrates able to take the critique of poetry to its full extent in Book X.

This brief and concise account of the dialogue demonstrates the dialectical movement of the entire work, as well as its profound unity. Indeed, although this chapter has employed a selection of themes and passages to underline elements of the argumentation, none of these passages could have been used if they had not been understood within the context of the entire dialogue. One means of expressing this effectively is as follows:

73 For further information about this interpretation of the *Republic* and the relevance of *eros* in this dialogue, cf. Roochnik, 2003.

74 *Resp.* 435d.

> No single bit of the dialogue, then, should be isolated and treated as a whole. Similarly the whole should not be read as a single argument guided by the norm of logical consistency. Instead, it is a dialectical drama, a dialogue, a conversation that twists and turns, develops and at times revises what was earlier said. In its totality it gives voice to the truth about the human soul.[75]

What is at stake in this criticism of poetry and ancient culture, not only in the *Republic*, but also in the *Ion*, is the protection of and control over the human soul.

4 *Hermeneia* and Responsibility

There remains one aspect still to be analysed: the role of the poet as *hermeneus*.[76] As previously mentioned, the term may be translated in multiple different ways, a variety which is exploited throughout the dialogue *Ion*. Its first and most generic translation is "interpreter," which literally describes the role of the rhapsode Ion – a fine interpreter of a single poet, Homer. Here "interpreter" is intended both in the sense of a literary exegete, but also in the sense of a performer of verses – at least, in Ion's own view of himself, although Socrates' dialectical confrontation proves this to be false. In fact, Ion has no understanding of the thoughts of the poets, but may only interpret – that is, repeat and perform – Homer's verses in virtue of a divine gift, not a mastery of poetry.

The role and the position of the interpreter in the process of transmitting knowledge are "in-between": what he amounts to, is the deliverer of a message. This is confirmed by the etymology of the word *hermeneus*, which is connected to the Greek god Hermes, whose prime role was to that of messenger between gods and humans. As Olympic gods would not usually communicate directly with human beings owing to the ontological distance between gods and humans, their messages would most often not be expressed in a manner human beings could understand it – i.e., in the kind of rational language

75 Roochnik, 2003, p. 131.

76 As anticipated earlier, the general term used to translate *hermeneus* is "interpreter," but this translation is influenced by biblical exegesis. In Ancient Greece, the term originally referred to the semantic area of "expression," meaning the vocal expression of something held inside (such as the voice of a god). Only later (in Pythagoras and more explicitly in Plato) does it assume the meaning of "mediator" between gods and humans, of which Hermes has been taken as divine representative. From the meaning of "mediator," the shift to "interpreter" or "translator" is quite natural. Cf. Carchia, 2003, p. 161.

on which communication is normally based – and instead, the gods availed themselves of various irrational channels: dreams, oracles, exceptional natural events, and symbols. On the other side of this communication, human beings were required to ask the gods for their support and mercy by practising particular rituals, most of which consisted in sacrificing animals, and occasionally human beings.[77] A demonstration of this practice can be found in the dialogue *Statesman*:

> Then let's get still closer to those we haven't yet cross-examined. There are those who have a part of a subordinate sort of expert knowledge in relation to divination; for they are, I believe, considered to be interpreters from gods to men [...]. And then too the class of priests, in its turn, has—as custom tells us—expert knowledge about the giving through sacrifices of gifts from us to the gods which are pleasing to them, and about asking from them through prayers for the acquisition of good things for us. I imagine that both of these things are parts of a subordinate art. (*Pol.* 290c–d) [78]

This exchange between gods and humans, and vice versa, had to be regulated and translated by specialised persons – i.e., individuals in the role of the *hermeneus*. In the passage quoted above, these individuals are identified as *hermeneutai* (interpreters), with their general art, to which this and other forms of knowledge are subordinate, being identified as *mantiken* (divination). Since the *hermeneus* remains a human being, his means to access this superior knowledge (i.e., divine communication) is by diminishing his human side and pushing himself out of his soul: indeed, it is only when he loses control over his soul that the voice of the god may inhabit him, making him *entheos*. This is typical of all the genres of *mantike* (divination).

Before being able to understand the type of divination that characterises the rhapsode Ion, it is first necessary to analyse the account Plato gives of divination in his works. The dialogue that deals with the topic of divination more so than any other is the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato identifies four types of divination. This discussion originates from a previous attempt to positively

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77 The most common ritual practice for gaining the favour of the gods was the hecatomb: the sacrifice of a hundred oxen. In some circumstances, a god would have asked for the sacrifice of a virgin, as narrated by Euripides in the tragedy, *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Not all the rituals to propitiate the gods involved sacrifices; sometimes they consisted in the offering of bread, seeds, and devotional objects.

78 Translated by Rowe, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

re-evaluate the effects of *eros*, which is said to make human beings irrational to the point of losing control over their own souls. In the first instance, this is considered negatively by Socrates, although he subsequently reconsiders his opinion to eventually praise this erotic madness as something divine that humans derive from the gods. In this praise Socrates connects, etymologically,[79] divine madness to the *mantike techne* (divination art), of which there are four primary expressions: prediction of the future through the observation of natural events – such as the flight of the bird; mystic and purification rites to clear ancient guilts from the soul;

> Third comes the kind of madness that is possession by the Muses, which takes a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations. If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses' madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds. (*Phaedr*. 245a)

Fourth comes erotic madness.

Here poetry is conceived of as possession by the Muses, a view which is also expressed in the *Ion*. Although his description which employs highly inspirational words appears to praise the poetic activity, in reality, Socrates criticises the art for what was frequently held as its virtue: its ability to cause someone to be out of control.

> For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy. Therefore because it's not by mastery that they make poems or say many lovely things about their subjects (as you do about Homer) – but because it's by a divine gift – each poet is able to compose beautifully only that for

79 "The people who designed our language in the old days never thought of madness as something to be ashamed of or worthy of blame; otherwise they would not have used the word 'manic' for the finest experts of all – the ones who tell the future thereby weaving insanity into prophecy. They thought it was wonderful when it came as a gift of the god, and that's why they gave its name to prophecy; but nowadays people don't know the fine points, so they stick in a 't' and call it 'mantic.'" (*Phaedr.* 244b–c).

> which the Muse has aroused him: one can do dithyrambs, another encomia, one can do dance songs, another, epics, and yet another, iambics; and each of them is worthless for the other types of poetry. You see, it's not mastery that enables them to speak those verses, but a divine power. (*Ion* 534b–c)

This passage not only enhances the description of Plato's theory of poetic madness,[80] but also points to a relevant aspect in his criticism of poetry: according to Plato, nothing a poet composes originates from his own mastery, but rather from a divine power – in fact, it is only possible to compose verses when possession of the intellect is lost and the soul is somehow emptied, leaving space for the god. Without being *entheos* (possessed by a god), a poet would not be able to compose any verse whatsoever. Evidence for this relies on the fact that if verse-making were an art to master, a good poet would be able to compose any type of verse, but this is not the case; rather, each poet is gifted at composing only a single type of verse "for which the Muse has aroused him."

For Plato, the problematic aspect of this loss of control over the intellect is that it is contagious. Referenced in the *Ion* as a kind of magnetic power that bonds together many rings in a chain, the analogy here signifies not only how poetic madness is pervasive, but also how complex and multi-layered poetic composition and performance are: the spectator – the last ring in the chain – is held by the middle ring, the rhapsode/performer,[81] who is in turn held by the poet – the first ring in the chain – who depends directly on the Muses to magnetically radiate the power of the god which pulls the souls of the humans through the chain. Once again, the "hermeneutic" role of the rhapsode is made evident by his in-between position within this chain. Indeed, each ring has a partially hermeneutic role via a role of transmission that is not

80 A Platonic theory of divine madness can be traced by considering these passages from the dialogues: *Ion*, 534b, *Apol.* 22b–c, *Prot.* 347e, *Meno* 99c, *Rep.* 598c–e, *Symp.* 218b, *Phaedr.* 244d, 256b, *Tim.* 72a, *Leg.* 682a, and *Leg.* 719c which reads as follows: "There is an old tale, legislator, which we poets never tire of telling and which all laymen confirm, to the effect that when a poet takes his seat on the tripod of the Muse, he cannot control his thoughts. He's like a fountain where the water is allowed to gush forth unchecked. His art is the art of representation, and when he represents men with contrasting characters he is often obliged to contradict himself, and he doesn't know which of the opposing speeches contains the truth. But for the legislator, this is impossible: he must not let his law say two different things on the same subject; his rule has to be 'one topic, one doctrine.'"

81 *Ion*, 536a. Here Plato places the role of the rhapsode and the role of the actor on very similar levels, thereby emphasising the performative side of the rhapsodic activity.

simply vertical, but also lateral, given that, as the analogy goes on to enumerate, there are numerous rings hanging on each side which are held directly by the Muses, representing the art of dancing.

On the level of the poet's ring, there is some specificity: some rhapsodes may be held by the poetic ring of Homer, some by Orpheus, and others by Musaeus. This specificity nullifies any form of independence and choice from the rhapsode and explains why they may only sing one kind of verse (e.g., Ion can sing only Homer's verses). If the poet, dependent on the Muses' inspiration, is already limited to composing only one type of verse, the rhapsode – who has the role of the *hermeneus par excellence* – becomes even further deprived of freedom, and thus of any human responsibility. This is what the conclusion of the dialogue points to:

> SOCRATES: If you're really a master of your subject, and if, as I said earlier, you're cheating me of the demonstration you promised about Homer, then you're doing me wrong. But if you're not a master of your subject, if you're possessed by a divine gift from Homer, so that you make many lovely speeches about the poet without knowing anything – as *I* said about you – then you're not doing me wrong. So choose, how do you want us to think of you – as a *man* who does wrong, or as someone *divine*?
>
> ION: There's a great difference, Socrates. It's much lovelier to be thought divine.
>
> SOCRATES: Then *that* is how we think of you, Ion, the lovelier way: it's as someone divine, and not as master of a profession, that you are a singer of Homer's praises. (*Ion* 542a–b)[82]

If Ion does not want to take responsibility for his ignorance, then he cannot take credit for, nor even ownership of, his performances. This ignorance is primarily expressed by the phenomenon of *polymathia*[83] (the self-proclaimed knowledge of everything) that Socrates often encountered while strolling in the *polis*, especially when observing the sophists, and here he shows that being able to speak about everything – as Ion claims – is equivalent to knowing nothing. It must be acknowledged that this fault affects Ion only in a secondary instance, as a feature of epic poetry which affects him insofar as he is a repeater of those verses, but he also fails to prove any knowledge of his own *techne* which might

82 Italics in this passage are not mine. Cf. Plato, 1997.

83 This is exemplified by the myth of Proteus recalled earlier; cf. *Ion* 542a.

allow him to avoid the charge of ignorance. Evidence of his failure, of course, is that he can sing only Homer's verses, whereas a master of a *techne* as a whole would be able to sing the verses of all the poets. As such, Ion is irresponsible on three counts: first, he believes he knows everything, but in truth is not able to respond and take responsibility for what he believes he knows; second, he has no responsibility for the verses he sings, and cannot respond for their composition because he has not mastered a complete *techne* to apply to the poetic art, instead depending on a single poet; last, he has no ownership of his own activity, as he is under a god's possession during the performance.

For Socrates, it is vital that Ion acknowledges the limits of his responsibility, as this also traces the limits of the rhapsode's freedom, which, having lost control over the soul, amounts to their having given up a portion of humanity. After all, being divine is not such an advantage. From Socrates' point of view, Ion is a simple voice in the manipulative hands of divine inspiration; he is a vehicle, a *hermeneus* whose identity and freedom are nullified by divine inspiration. Even worse, his loss of control over his own soul is magnetic and contagious, to the point of affecting the audience by leading them into a state of trance.

This view of poetry as a powerful means of encouraging a dangerous psychological identification, ties together the criticism of the rhapsode's contagious loss of control over the soul and the criticism of poetry in the *Republic*, whose main focus is on the soul of young citizens. In both the *Ion* and the *Republic*, the criticism is not related to "artistic" reasons, but instead to a system of values and meaning that weakened the soul through a progressive dispersion of and distancing from the truth, and impeded the development of the new-born philosophy.

In more contemporary terms, it may be said that traditional, oral Greek poetry was a powerful medium which reinforced the psychological damage already intrinsic in the contents of its tradition. The performances of rhapsodes, accompanied by music and dance, empowered the negative effects of this archaic set of values on the soul, as McLuhan's theorisation of the medium indicates:

> [...] this fact, characteristic of all media, means that the "content" of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. If it is asked, "What is the content of speech?" it is necessary to say, "It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal."[84]

84 McLuhan, 1994, p. 8.

Employing McLuhan's terminology, the voice of the rhapsode itself may be characterised as a medium whose content is another medium, whose content is another medium, and so on – as the Platonic analogy of the magnetic chain aptly expressed, well before McLuhan.

The Platonic critique of the oral tradition is nevertheless not yet entirely exhausted in the critique of poetic madness, and thus lack of poetic responsibility. Indeed, the *Republic* shows that, beyond the psychological aspect, there is also an ontological aspect to the criticism which is related to the issue of *mimesis*. While the *Ion* highlights how the reproduction of a message without *techne*, without *dianoia* and, ultimately, without responsibility, is highly damaging for the souls of the audience, the *Republic* highlights how the repetition carried out by the poet is damaging for the soul because the nature of the message, given its mimetic (re)reproduction, is ontologically deceptive. Here the theme of the truth of poetry, which is overshadowed by the divinity of the message in the *Ion*, comes into play in full force: if, in the *Ion*, the message is (the voice of the) medium (which is itself a medium of a medium with a divine source), in the *Republic*, the medium is the message (which, being already a mediated message, is false).

The ambiguity of the term *hermeneus* now becomes much clearer. Personified by Ion himself, this ambiguity arises in his claim to be an interpreter (*hermeneus*) of the thoughts of the poets, while Socrates proves him to be a mere medium (*hermeneus*) of a single poet over the course of the dialogue.

A similar ambiguity is displayed in the *Republic*, in relation to the different meanings of the term *mimesis*: if, in Book III, *mimesis* is one of the *lexeis* (techniques of poetic composition), in Book X *mimesis* is instead revealed as an ontological deception. This inner evolution across both dialogues may be compared through the parallel evolution of the terms *hermeneus* and *mimesis*, which undergo a transition in each dialogue that also reflects an evolution of the Platonic theory of oral poetry, and, as Catherine Collobert claims, of Platonic production more generally:

> In *Republic* Book X the falsehood of poetry is clearly stated and the definition of poetry as a deceitful art appears to be justified. Plato, dare I say it, lays his cards on the table. The cautious critique of poetry, which Plato shows in the *Ion*, Book III of the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*, is no longer in place. The critique is final: poetry is nothing but an illusion and a dangerous deceit. *Mimesis* is no longer viewed as a technique of narrative combined with a poetic experience, but is regarded as the nature of poetry.[85]

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85 Collobert in Destrée and Herrmann, 2011, p. 49.

The turning point for this shift is the increasing involvement of the image as a term of comparison to explain *poietic*[86] activities in a general sense.

5 Image-Making

The previous section argued that there is an inner transition in the Platonic criticism of oral poetry. This transition moves from a focus on a particular aspect of the criticism to a more abstract and ontological approach explicated by comparison of the image. In its essential terms, this criticism finds multiple points of contact with the Platonic criticism of writing. Two of these, often considered opposing poles in Plato's philosophy, ultimately address the same ontological issue – the mimetic relation between *eidos* and *eidolon* – for which reason they may be reduced to what, in the previous chapter, has been referred to as "the dialectic of the image," an expression coined by Gadamer.[87]

In both the *Ion* and the *Republic*, there are references to the image which aim to reinforce and move the criticism of oral poetry to a higher level of abstraction. According to the same abstractive process, these references to the image are first expressed through an analogy of the art of painting and then the more generic "image-making."

Socrates establishes the analogy between rhapsody and painting[88] in the *Ion* on the basis that they are similar arts to compare when establishing that each is an art to master as a whole. What specifically connects these two aforementioned "arts" is that they both produce something through a mimetic mechanism, and hence require a *techne* – as any other form of production.

In the *Republic,* this analogy is carried throughout the whole dialogue, where it is expressed in greater complexity. Its first occurrence is in reference to painting as part of Socrates' list of accessories that arise when the city expands,[89] followed by a further occurrence which immediately establishes a connection with the oral tradition of storytelling:

> Those that Homer, Hesiod, and other poets tell us, for surely they composed false stories, told them to people, and are still telling them. […]

86 Here the term is intended in the original and more generic sense of *poiesis,* as in "making," "producing."

87 Gadamer, 1980, pp. 112–113.

88 As discussed earlier in this chapter, this analogy is actually wider and also considers the art of sculpting, the art of flute- and cithara-playing, and the art of singing. Cf. *Ion* 533a.

89 *Resp.* 373a.

> what fault do you find in them? The fault one ought to find first and foremost, especially if the falsehood isn't well told. [...] When a story gives a bad image of what the gods and heroes are like, the way a painter does whose picture is not at all like the things he's trying to paint. (*Resp*. 377d–e)

Following this instance, there is a progressive escalation in the use of the painting analogy[90] in Book X, where the analogy is more explicitly connected to the critique of the oral poetic tradition:

> Then shall we conclude that all poetic imitators, beginning with Homer, imitate images of virtue and all the other things they write about and have no grasp of the truth? As we were saying just now, a painter, though he knows nothing about cobblery, can make what seems to be a cobbler to those who know as little about it as he does and who judge things by their colours and shapes. [...] And in the same way, I suppose we'll say that a poetic imitator uses words and phrases to paint coloured pictures of each of the crafts. He himself knows nothing about them, but he imitates them in such a way that others, as ignorant as he, who judge by words, will think he speaks extremely well about cobblery or generalship or anything else whatever, provided – so great is the natural charm of these things – that he speaks with meter, rhythm, and harmony, for if you strip a poet's works of their musical colourings and take them by themselves, I think you know what they look like. [...] We say that a maker of an image – an imitator – knows nothing about that which is but only about its appearance. (*Resp*. 600e–601c)

The critique of oral poetry is empowered by the painting analogy, which helps to show more clearly that the weakness of this type of *mimesis* is not only in its psychological and educational aspects, but also in the epistemic and ontological aspects already discussed.

This also highlights the lack of responsibility of the poetic message, as its spoken words carry little content, and instead rely on appearances, along with meter, rhythm, and harmony. The multicoloured (*poikilia*)[91] *mimesis* behind

90 The painting analogy recurs very often in the *Republic*; not all the recurrences are relevant for this argument and not all of them are worthy of analysis here. A brief list of the passages with the most relevant recurrences, however, is as follows: 400e, 401a, 500e–501c, 523b, 583b, 586b, 596e, 597b, d–e, 597e–598c, 600e–601a, 601c, 602a, 602d, 603b, 605a–b.

91 *Resp*. 604d.

both painting and poetry thus provokes dispersions: in being repeated, mouth by mouth, the poetic words lose their origin and any form of ownership; in the same way, the image, being represented multiple times, becomes divorced from the original and ultimately lost.

Something similar was analysed in the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* discussed in the previous chapter:

> You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support. (*Phaedr*. 275d–e)

Once mimetically repeated, both the spoken and written words end up fragmented and lost, not only in terms of their meaning and their truth, but also their ownership – precisely the same mechanism established by the mimetic process of image-making. Indeed, the painting analogy works so well for both the written and spoken word because it is itself an analogy of the ontological mimetic mechanism between *eidos* and *eidolon*, which is intrinsic in any form of *mimesis*.[92] As image-based, it could be said that the painting analogy is itself an *eidolon* of the *eidos* of the mimetic mechanism.[93]

The painting analogy therefore seems to support the argument that no opposition between writing and orality is implied at the essential core of Plato's criticism, and even if it were, it would be completely inessential – indeed, the

92 Stephen Halliwell, in his study on *mimesis*, underlines two aspects that are worth recalling about Plato's conception of painting: first that, very often, Plato refers to painting as a synecdoche for all the figurative arts; second, that if painting had not existed, it may not have mattered for Aristotle, but would have deprived Plato of a "source of reflection on human attempts to model and interpret reality" (Halliwell, 2002, p. 125).

93 The model of pictorial *mimesis* has been a *topos* in Plato's dialogues since the early dialogues like the *Cratylus*, cf. Halliwell, 2002, pp. 126–128.

painting analogy, which connects the two criticisms, is itself inessential. This is because the critique of writing and the critique of orality are two expressions of a single common-rooted criticism and reading either criticism in terms of contrast or supremacy does not better help us understand their original, ontological value. In fact, the best ontological expression of the criticism of image-making may be found in the *Sophist*.[94]

Representing an invaluable model of comparison for grasping the ontology that structures the "dialectic of the image," in the *Sophist* is conducted a hunt for the definition of the sophist through the definitional tool of the *logos*, which explicates itself in the dialectical exchange between the Visitor from Elea (representative of the Eleatic philosophical tradition) and Theaetetus. The dialogue therefore stands first as a generic model because it intentionally shows multiple *eidola* of the *eidos* of the dialectic structure; and a model specific to this work, since, in order to define the sophist, the two interlocutors are required to refer to the *mimetic mechanism* as the only way through which the falsehood of the sophist's *logoi* may come into existence in language and essence. In fact, when the Visitor from Elea and Theaetetus get closer to catching him with their seventh definition, the *mimetic mechanism* plays a determinant role in the chase.

This chase has been particularly difficult for the two philosophers, as the sophist manages to escape any definition and slip from the dialectic net at least six times. The main reason for this difficulty in positing a unifying definition (*synagoge*) is his polymorphic nature: the sophist knows not only "how to say things or to contradict people, but how to make and do everything."[95] In the same way, as Ion claims to be able to speak about any *techne* (although he is not really able to perform any of them) and the mirror in the *Republic* is able to represent everything (but nothing real), the sophist can say and reproduce anything.[96]

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94 The interpretation of the *Sophist* in this work takes a very different direction to one of the most established interpretations proposed by Stanley Rosen. Rosen (1983, pp. 165–173) argues that the analogy of the image in the *Sophist* obscures the real disputative nature of the sophist and allow the Visitor to avoid this aspect of the analysis. Instead, this work argues that the exemplifying role of the image in this seventh definition is important for highlighting the commonality between all those activities in which the mimetic mechanism is activated by means of the relation between *eidos* and *eidolon*.

95 *Soph.* 233d.

96 "The sophist, the orator, and the poet fall under the same category of ignorant and 'insincere manufacturer of eidola by mimicry' as Dodds, 1959 puts it." (Collobert, in Destrée and Herrmann, 2011, p. 58).

In the *Sophist*, the best way this ability may be exemplified is once again by the painting (in this case drawing) analogy:

> So think about the man who promises he can make everything by means of a single kind of expertise. Suppose that by being expert at drawing he produces things that have the same names as real things. Then we know that when he shows his drawings from far away he'll be able to fool the more mindless young children into thinking that he can actually produce anything he wants to. [...] Well then, won't we expect that there's another kind of expertise – this time having to do with words – and that someone can use it to trick young people when they stand even farther away from the truth about things? (*Soph*. 234b–c)

The kind of expertise that is like this is sophistry: by means of spoken images/copies (*eidola legomena*)[97] the sophist is able to trick young and foolish people, as he seems able to reproduce everything with his *logoi*. This ability, however, is nothing but *mimesis* – a mere reproduction of *eidola*. The analysis and terminology that are used to describe this process in the *Sophist* are much more detailed and well-articulated than elsewhere, precisely because the Visitor and Theaetetus are involved in definition-hunting. The definition is eventually pinpointed as *eidolopoiike techne* (image-making art/copy-making art). This is the seventh and last definition of the sophist, which involves a further reflection on the image that is worth considering here: the image-making art/copy-making art is subject to a distinction (*diairesis*) – namely that it can be a means of likeness-making (*eikastike techne*) or a means of appearance-making (*phantastike techne*).[98] While likeness-making is a way of reproducing an image which respects the proportions and real colours of the model (*eidos*), appearance-making is a form of reproduction in which proportions are not correct, as it possesses no interest in representing the truth; its aim is merely that the copy seems beautiful. This last "part of imitation covers a great deal of painting and of the rest of imitation."[99]

97 *Soph.* 234c. Translated by White, ed. by Cooper 1997.

98 Belfiore warns of the common mistake of considering the *phantastike mimesis* the same as the imitation of *eidola* in Book x of the *Republic*. The *eidola* of the *phantastike techne* in the *Sophist* are deceptive in virtue of a partiality of vision; the *eidola* of Book x of the *Republic* are deceptive ontologically. This warning is poignant and correct, and also depends on the different articulation of the arguments in the two dialogues. There are, however, reasons to believe that both types of *eidola* ultimately have their main weakness in their ontological status. Cf. Belfiore, 1984, pp. 129–132.

99 *Soph.* 236c.

At this point, it seems logical that the sophistic art is placed in the latter category; nevertheless, the Visitor and Theaetetus now have even more doubts than before. On this basis, they now leave the painting analogy to move to the real issue of sophistry (the one related to *logoi*), but, in attempting to get to the heart of the issue, have made things more complicated by challenging the Parmenidean interdiction:

> […] which type we should put the sophist in. He's really an amazing man – very hard to make out. […] This appearing, and this seeming but not being, and this saying things but not true things – all these issues are full of confusion, just as they always have been. It's extremely hard, […] Because this form of speech of ours involves the rash assumption that that which is not is, since otherwise falsity wouldn't come into being. But when we were boys, my boy, the great Parmenides testified to us from start to finish, speaking in both prose and poetic rhythms, that *Never shall this force itself on us, that that which is not may be; While you search, keep your thought far away from this path.* (*Soph.* 236c–237a)[100]

The Visitor, through dialectic confrontation with Theaetetus, has gone too far – to the borders of Elea and the Eleatic philosophy of which Parmenides can be considered the most relevant exponent. Once they accepted *pseudos* (falsity) into language, they necessarily asserted the existence of something that is not. In the same way, once *eidola* (images/copies) and *phantasmata* (appearances) were taken as real, the existence of "something that is not" was admitted. In this paradox, the biggest challenge posed by the sophist and the main danger of the mimetic mechanism is revealed: both allow the *pseudos* to find its way, through *logos,* into being.

The philosopher can still make good use of the *mimesis*, however, as the rest of the dialogue proves: dialectic, exhibited as a *methodos*[101] from the very beginning of the dialogue, is nothing but a form of *mimesis*, an *eikastike techne* which resembles the structure of the *eide* and their articulations. The analogy of fishing[102] (which derives progressively from hunting aquatic-hunting, fishing, strike-hunting) for instance, which is designed to represent the initial

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100 Italics in this passage are not mine.

101 *Soph.* 218d. The Ancient Greek term *methodos*, from which the word "method" derives, is composed from the word *hodos* (a path, a route) preceded by the preposition *meta* (that gives the meaning of moving forwards). Hence it is the way to move forwards on a path and represents a quest that proceeds towards a destination.

102 *Soph.* 220a–221b.

training for this method, is a form of *mimesis*, as an *eidolon* which represents the very structure of dialectic in its *eide*. For something to be defined, it must first be related to something else of which it partakes (*synagogein*); second, this must be divided between two different horns (*diairein*), of which one of the two horns will then be excluded (*temnein*), and the movement will start over again with a new *synagoge* from the unexcluded horn. This will eventually lead to a definition which contains in itself the different stages of *diairesis* and *synagoge*, and thus require no further divisions or exclusions.[103]

The dialectical structure of the *logoi* resembles the *eide* and their articulation.[104] This supports the position held earlier in this work regarding the exemplifying role of metaphors and analogies in Plato's works: these must be considered for their analogical structure and their geometrical articulation that respects proportions, rather than strictly literally. Nevertheless, the effectiveness and vividness of most of these analogies often recall semantic areas that can inform the meaning of the analogy itself (i.e., the fishing analogy suggests that the sophist is someone to chase; the bed and tables analogy in the *Republic* suggests that *mimesis* may occur when *poiesis* is involved etc.).

The complex analogy between *eide* and *logoi* is itself based on a mimetic mechanism whose features are explored in the next chapter.

103 For an accurate, logical explanation of the dialectical method in the *Sophist*, cf. Fronterotta, 2007, pp. 36–60.

104 Cf. the grammar example at *Soph.* 253a, and the weaving (*symploke*) analogy at 259d–e. Cf. also *Phaedr*. 265d and *Polit*. 286d.

CHAPTER 3

The Ontology of the Image in Plato's Works

Both the critique of writing and the critique of orality, in their deepest philosophical essence, reveal a connection with the ontology of the image. The reasons for this are intimately related to the mimetic mechanism implied in both ways of transmitting knowledge. By following the thread of the image and its mimetic vocation, it becomes clearer that the criticisms of both writing and orality are inessential. In fact, Plato does not simply address the way that knowledge can be transmitted (either in written or oral speech) but the nature of being itself and the possibility of grasping and communicating it at all, as a form of knowledge.

Following the attentive evaluations carried out in this work, it seems that there are more points of contact than elements of opposition at the core of both criticisms. It is thus fruitless to consider the orality/writing issue as a substantial matter, implying that one way of expression excludes the other.[1] This does not mean that the medium is an innocent tool. It is, instead, itself misleading and dangerous, but only at a secondary level, that of the reproduction of the *logoi*.[2] Being a form of de-potentiated *poiesis* (production of a production), the media may enhance the potential deception of some *logoi* by means of the *mimesis* to which they are subjected, although they are not objects of criticism in themselves. According to this perspective, all those theories which focus mainly (or only) on the mediatic side of the Platonic criticism are partial, almost like a synecdoche: they take a part to mean the whole. This approach can still be valid if used for a paradigmatic reading that eventually traces back the philosophical genealogy of the criticism, while, if it is taken literally and in an unrelated way, it can be deceptive. It is like considering one of the *eidola* as the *eidos* or, in other

1 As Trabattoni argues in different works, the opposite of written speech is not oral speech, but speech "written in the soul" (*Phaedr*. 278a). The philosophical discourse (either written or oral) does not aim to mirror the truth, but it aims to stimulate philosophical exchange through dialectic. Cf. Trabattoni, 2015, p. 107. In addition, Trabattoni clarifies that if the two ways of transmitting knowledge are really meant to be read in opposition, orality would be superior to writing but exclusively because it can avail itself of that responsiveness denied to writing. However, the fact that orality can avail itself of responsiveness does not mean that it always does so, and indeed Plato does not criticise orality itself, but those forms of orality which lack responsibility and responsiveness. For a general theory of persuasion and philosophical knowledge in Plato, cf. Trabattoni, 1993.

2 Cf. McLuhan, 1994.

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words, as if the criticism of the deception of a medium were to overshadow the criticism of the deception itself. It is indeed this same deception whose philosophical implications are analysed throughout this chapter.

1 *Eidos* and *Eidolon*

To trace a profile of the image in Plato's work is a determinant enterprise that reveals the ontological structure at the heart of his philosophical thought. Plato intentionally establishes a duality between being and appearing;[3] the second step of this distinction is to give a negative connotation to the world of appearances (*eidola*) as being ontologically and epistemologically, hence psychologically too, less than the authentic world of beings (*eide*).[4]

The dissociation between appearance and truth happens through the mimetic mechanism – as discussed at different stages in this work. *Mimesis* is, in fact, the production of images: "We say imitation is a sort of production (*poiesis*), but of copies (*eidolon*) and not of the things themselves."[5]

Hence, on one side there is the *eidos*, and on the opposing side there is the *eidolon*.[6] This conceptual couple is based on a conflict that does not tear apart

3 Cf. Vernant, 1982, pp. 119–152.

4 On this, Lidia Palumbo emphasises that there are still some images (*eidola*), the philosophical ones, which have a high knowledge content (Palumbo, 2008, p. 45, n. 48). This was argued at the end of the previous chapter too, when distinguishing between *eikastike mimesis* and *phantastike mimesis*.

5 *Soph.* 265b.

6 The conceptual couple *eidos-eidolon* is considered in this work the best terminology to express the mimetic relation between the original and its copy. However, there is full awareness that throughout Plato's works there is not always homogeneity in the use of these two terms (very often Plato uses terms like *eikon* or *phantasma* in place of *eidolon*, and *paradeigma*, *genos* or *idea* in place of *eidos*, etc.). In the same way, there is full awareness that there is not a univocal meaning attributed to these two terms. This is perfectly in line with Plato's philosophical writing in which usually the meaning and the selection of the terms is determined by the context of use and the structuring of the dialectical reasoning. For a clear distinction between these visual terms and their contexts of use, it is recommended the essay by Collobert in Collobert, Destrée, Gonzales, 2012, pp. 87–108. In regard to the term *eidos* and its use in the context of the theory of Ideas, cf. Fronterotta, 2001, pp. XII–XV. For other uses of the word *eidolon* in dialogues other than those quoted in this chapter, please cf. *Gorg.* 463d2/e4; *Lysis* 219d3; *Symp*. 212a4; *Phaed.* 66c3, 81d3; *Resp.* 382b10 and 443c4. Furthermore, it needs to be clarified that the theory of knowledge exposed by Plato at *Republic* 509c ff., although extremely relevant and connected to the paradigm of vision, has been intentionally excluded as it focuses specifically on the epistemological side of the issue, while here the attempt is to unearth the ontology behind the mimetic mechanism.

the relation between the two terms, but in fact reinforces it. *Eidos* and *eidolon* are co-dependent and have the same source, which can be detected in their etymological origin in the verb *horao* (I see), whose aorist form is *idein*, which in turn is etymologically connected to the verb *oida* (I know).[7] According to Ernst Cassirer, who dedicated an essay to this conceptual couple,[8] *eidos* and *eidolon* represent two fundamentally different qualities of vision:[9] *eidos* represents the contemplative side of vision, freed from perception, which grasps shapes through an act of ideal conformation; *eidolon* represents the passive side of vision as sensible perception. In a certain way, the *eide*[10] are elements of stability both in ontology and in epistemology; they manage to maintain integrity and unity in the face of the multiplicity and deterioration provoked by all the sensible and reproduced *eidola*. The co-dependency of *eidos* and *eidolon* is explicated by that movement of separation (*diairesis*) and unification (*synagoge*) essential to the dialectic, and thus essential to the philosophical quest. If there were no *eidola* to catch, the philosopher would not be able to find a way back to the *eide*, and if there were no stabilising *eide*, the *eidola* would not have any sort of genealogy from which to be derived.

This seems to be a very intuitive and broadly accepted version of Plato's philosophy, in a general sense. The couple *eidos-eidolon*, in fact, emphasises the Platonic theory of Ideas (or forms), according to which ideas are the real and fundamental forms of every being, condemned to appear through the multiplicity of the sensible experience.

This work, though, has no real interest in reassessing this ontological and epistemological model, nor in stressing a form of dualism in Plato's philosophy. Rather, it seems relevant to consider how the paradigm of the image, configured here as the ontology of the image, is an evident and immediate paradigm for reading Plato's dialogues and overcoming some apparent contradictions in his thought. One main reason for the relevance of the image may rely on

7 Cf. Ross, 1951, p. 13; Hyland, 2011, p. 156, n. 37; Kirkland, 2012, pp. 153–172.

8 "Eidos und Eidolon" in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*, Vieweg+ Teubner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1924.

9 Cassirer, 1924.

10 Ritter (1910) has identified six meanings of the term *eidos*: the outward appearance; the constitution or condition; the characteristic that determines the concept; the concept itself; the genus or species; the objective reality underlying our concept. The translation from German to English of these six definitions by Ritter is by Ross, 1951, p. 15. This variety of meaning is due to the inner evolution of Plato's dialogues, and in fact it can be noticed that in later dialogues the meaning of the term has a more technical shade (such as class or form), while in earlier dialogues it has the generic sense that is derived from the Preplatonic tradition as well, the meaning of visible form (Ross, 1951, p. 15).

the fact that, for Plato, every form of production (*poiesis*) is dependent on and guided by a form of vision. As already shown in several passages quoted earlier, the connection between production and vision occurs regarding the art of the painter, the carpenter, the sophist, the philosopher and even the demiurge.[11] What connects *poiesis* and vision is indeed *mimesis*: the couple *eidos-eidolon* works for the mimetic mechanism involved in both *poiesis* and vision.

The main reason to condemn *mimesis* is not the reproduction in itself, but its power to create a world of appearances and pretend that it is the real one. If the fiction of the *mimesis* is accepted, the possibility of travelling on a philosophical path towards the *eide* is denied, as the *mimetes* (imitator) cancels out the distance between *eidos* and *eidolon*. There is no distinction for the *mimetes*; conversely, the philosopher shows his best talent in the art of division[12] and distinction. Hence, the risk presented by *mimesis* is not only to immobilise everything in a world of *phantasmata*, but also to live in a lie, as happens to the prisoners chained in the cave – according to the myth narrated in Book VII of the *Republic*. So, if the sophist, the poet and the painter deny the way back to the *eide* by ignoring the division between *eidos* and *eidolon*, the philosopher makes the effort to accept the *eidola* but only to reveal their deception and reassess the realness of the *eide*.

It can be argued that the philosopher would not need to refer to the image as he has access to the *logos*, meant both as a system of thought and, mainly, as a way to articulate words in a web of relations. Nevertheless, very often the philosopher, in making use of the *logoi*, experiences that weakness of the *logoi*[13] themselves – the same weakness that seemed to be a point of failure of both written transmission and oral transmission, but also, the failure of the thought itself.

Faced with the failure of the *logoi*, the philosopher may avail of something more immediate and essential, such as the paradigm of the image. The immediate support of the image in favour of the *logoi* is explicated with a double movement of proximity and distance in the *Sophist*. In fact, after the seventh definition of the sophist as *eidolopoion* (creator of images), with the careful distinction of the *eidola* in *eikones* and *phantasmata*[14] – implying the superiority of the *eikon* over the *phantasma* – the quest is problematised again. The paradigm of the image has in fact led the Visitor and Theaetetus to admit in

11 *Tim.* 47b–c.

12 *Soph.* 253c–d.

13 Gadamer, 1980, pp. 93–123.

14 Here the reference is to the distinction of the art of image-making (*eidolopoiikes techne*) in *mimesis eikastike* (which produces *eikones*, proportionate images) and *mimesis phantastike* (which produces *phantasmata*, images based on appearances), *Soph.* 236b–c.

their speech that appearances exist. This verbal admission pushes them away from the image to shift back to language and its logical rules, such as the Parmenidean interdiction according to which the path towards the hypothesis of the existence of *not being* should never be undertaken.[15] Nevertheless, this is a new *aporia* (a dead end) at which point the Visitor and Theaetetus are brought to a halt again: it is impossible to verbalise with the *logoi* the existence of something that does not exist; the simple fact of naming its non-existence makes it exist. This *aporia* is caused by the weakness of the *logoi*, the reason why the *logos* is abandoned once again to come back to the *eidolon* as image/copy and its ontological relation with the *eidos*.

> So if we say he has some expertise in appearance-making, it will be easy for him to grab hold of our use of words in return and twist our words in the contrary direction. Whenever we call him a copy-maker he'll ask us what in the world we mean by a "copy."[16] We need to think, Theaetetus, about how to answer the young man's question. (*Soph*. 239c–d)

The question now is about the definition of *eidolon*. This time the *logos* can get real support from the paradigm of the image through the definition of the *eidolon* itself, a definition that needs to be made with the *logoi*. The level of abstraction offered by the image empowers the *logoi* to the point of finding a way to verbally articulate the existence of what does not exist. This twisting passage is put in place of Theaetetus' answer to the question of what the *eidolon* is. In his final answer, Theaetetus shows an ease that may surprise the reader – in fairness, it seems to surprise himself, too:

> THEAETETUS: What in the world would we say a copy[17] is, sir, except something that's made similar to a true thing and is another thing that's like it? [...] Not that it's *true* at all, but that it resembles the true thing. [...]
>
> VISITOR: So you're saying that that which is like is not really that which is, if you speak of it as not true.
>
> THEAETETUS: But it *is*, in a way.
>
> VISITOR: But not truly, you say.

15 *Soph*. 237a.

16 "Copy" here is the translation for the term *eidolon*, the meaning of which is in between copy/image.

17 Cf. previous note.

THEAETETUS: No, except that it really is a likeness.
VISITOR: So it's not really what is, but it really is what we call a likeness?
THEAETETUS: Maybe *that which is not* is woven together with *that which is* in some way like that – it's quite bizarre. (*Soph.* 240a–c) [18]

It takes some time, and a clear awareness of the previous analyses on the ontology of the image, to un-weave this answer by Theaetetus.

Firstly, once again, Theaetetus is contradicting the Parmenidean interdiction; in fact, he says that the *eidolon is* something made similar to a true thing. Hence, at the same time he is saying that the *eidolon is*, and that the *eidolon is not* – because it is not the true thing. There is a distinctive line of demarcation between the *eidolon* and the true thing. On a Parmenidean level of correspondence between ontology and language, what is true *is*; what is not true *is not*. Clearly, the ambiguity is represented by the verb "to be," intended in terms of positive ontology and simultaneously in terms of propositional truth.

Secondly, Theaetetus insists on similarity (*eoikos*), resemblance (*eoikos*), likeness (*eikon*). These terms work for him as mediators between what *is* and what *is not*. They do not, however, sound new, they come from the vocabulary of the *mimesis*, which should not elicit any surprise. As seen, the paradigm of the image and the paradigm of the production are intrinsically dependent on the mimetic mechanism which, in fact, reproduces copies of things and not real things. The answer to the question[19] is, then, *mimesis*. This is what Theaetetus is trying to say; it is indeed an answer that has already been given, but now it needs to be elevated to another level of analysis, to a metaphysical level.

Mimesis is the production of images (*eidolopoiike techne*). Within the production of images, one can distinguish between *mimesis eikastike* and *mimesis phantastike*. In the attempt to apply this paradigm of the image to the *logoi*, it emerges that the *logoi* are themselves mimetic: they are *eidola* of beings, at least according to the Parmenidean correspondence between ontology and language. The type of *mimesis* that governs the production of *logoi* is the *eikastike* one, the one that reproduces images as likenesses. It is as if there would be the same proportion between beings and *logoi*, a proportion whose measures are defined by the dialectical method which is applied to both being and

18 Italics in this passage are not mine. Cf. Plato, 1997.

19 "Whenever we call him a copy-maker he'll ask us what in the world we mean by a "copy." We need to think, Theaetetus, about how to answer the young man's question." (*Soph.* 239c–d).

language. It is as if, the dialectical method can be considered an *eikastike mimesis* of the geometry (the structure) intrinsic in being. This seems somehow inevitable: if it is true that everything that exists comes into being by virtue of a production,[20] then it seems impossible to escape the mimetic mechanism. However, thanks to the ontology of the image (governed itself by the *mimesis*), one can adequately distinguish between a "philosophical" *mimesis* and a "sophistic" *mimesis*. In this way, the *logoi* can be saved, even when they venture into the territory of the *eidola*.

Lastly, it is "quite bizarre" (*atopon*),[21] but there must a way whereby *what is not* is woven together with *what is*. Theaetetus cannot deny that there is a line of demarcation between *eidos* and *eidolon*, nor does he want to, but he is saying that, even if the two things are distinct, they do not live separate and distinct lives. This is quite realistically Plato's position: he never suggests that *eide* exist while *eidola* do not exist, but clearly distinguishes a different axiological and ontological level for each of them. The fact that the *eidolon* is deceptive while the *eidos* is real does not imply that the *eidolon* does not exist. This position cannot work coherently with Parmenides' stance. The further Theaetetus elaborates on his own definition of the image, the further from, or maybe the closer to, Parmenides he gets: he gets as close as to annihilate the Eleatic position. The warning comes from the Visitor, who is a disciple of Parmenides himself:

> VISITOR: Not to think that I'm turning into some kind of patricide. [...] In order to defend ourselves we're going to have to subject father Parmenides' saying to further examination, and insist by brute force both that *that which is not* somehow is, and then again that *that which is* somehow is not.
>
> THEAETETUS: It does seem that in what we're going to say, we'll have to fight through that issue.
>
> VISITOR: That's obvious even to a blind man, as they say. We'll never be able to avoid having to make ourselves ridiculous by saying conflicting things whenever we talk about

20 This has been already argued regarding the *Sophist*, but it is a common trait of *poiesis* in different dialogues. The most eloquent one reads as follows: "After all, everything that is responsible for creating something out of nothing is a kind of poetry (*poiesis*); and so all the creations of every craft and profession are themselves a kind of poetry (*poiesis*) and everyone who practices a craft is a poet." (*Symp.* 205b–c).

21 "Maybe *that which is not* is woven together with *that which is* in some way like that – it's quite bizarre." (*Soph.* 240a–c).

> false statements and beliefs, either as copies or likenesses or imitations or appearances, or about whatever sorts of expertise there are concerning those things—unless, that is, we either refute Parmenides' claims or else agree to accept them. (*Soph.* 241d–e)[22]

The role of the image is exhausted at this point in the *Sophist* and the chase can move back to the *logoi* which, through to the paradigm of the image, have been elevated on a metaphysical level.

2 The Ontology of the *Pseudos*

The paradigm of the image helps to highlight the sophistic deception on the ontological level. The corresponding level of deception, implied in the Parmenidean parallelism, is that of the *logos*. The shift from the deceptive image to the deceptive *logos* is a shift from the *eidolon* (copy/image) to the *pseudos* (falsity).

The *logoi*, in virtue of their weakness, are a source of strength for the sophist; in fact, he can use the *logoi* to name the existence of things that do not exist. Not only this, but his own existential status is determined by the violation of the Parmenidean interdiction. It is not accidental that while looking for a definition of the sophist, the Stranger and Theaetetus end up in this clamorous contradiction (to say that what is not *is*) which conduces them to confront many *aporiai*. This means not only that what the sophist says is deceptive, but also that he is deceptive himself.

In the first place, the deception of the sophistic *logoi* must be considered. It can be said that the sophist is a producer (*poietes*) of things that are not real, in virtue of that usual mimetic mechanism. This cannot be considered innocuous in any way, because the deception of the *logoi* implies a deception in the opinion (*pseudes doxa*) of whomever hears or reads these *logoi*.[23] The deception is contagious and always leads into *aporia*, almost like a bad illness that gets worse with every attempt to treat it, or a neurotic circle. There is a possible treatment, as well as a way out of the circle. It is a "homeopathic" treatment, but its countereffect is to break some sort of inner protective resistance and open the organism to new patterns. The solution is to perform a *mimesis* of the deceiver on the reverse side. This is what happens in the *Sophist*, when the

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22 Italics in this passage are not mine. Cf. Plato, trans. by White, ed. by Cooper 1997, p. 262.

23 *Soph.* 240c–d.

Visitor, with the support of Theaetetus, makes himself sophist-like by doing what the sophist does: he affirms the falsity not by speaking it with *pseudes logos*, but rather by accepting *pseudes doxa* (false opinion). Hence, the philosopher is also placing himself in the territory of the sophist, availing himself of the ontology of the *pseudos*, but on the passive side of it, believing in the deception (*apate*) instead of fighting it.

> VISITOR: So you're saying that a false belief is believing those which are not. [...] Believing that those which are not are not, or that those which in no way are in a way are?
> THEAETETUS: That those which are not are in a way, it has to be, if anyone is ever going to be even a little bit wrong.
> VISITOR: Well, doesn't a false belief also believe that those which completely are in no way are?
> THEAETETUS: Yes.
> VISITOR: And this is false too?
> THEAETETUS: Yes.
> VISITOR: And I think we'll also regard false speaking the same way, as saying that those which are are not, and that those which are not are. (*Soph.* 240d–241a)

The movement from the *logos* to the *doxa* serves first to explain the dangerous effects of the *pseudos* on the soul, but it also prepares a way back, and eventually a way out, for the philosopher. The philosopher does not want to say any false discourse (*pseudes logos*), but he can mimetically ("as if") believe in a false opinion (*pseudes doxa*). Believing in a false opinion, and accepting it, also extends the acceptance to the *logoi*. While lingering a little bit in the territory of the *pseudos*, the philosopher can find a way out from *aporia*. The problem is that this determines the final rupture with the father Parmenides. Nothing seems to crumble, though, and by accepting the *pseudos*, the philosopher has not become a sophist himself. The philosopher has proved that even when performing the worst of the *mimeseis* (making himself a sort of sophist) he is still different from what he is imitating because the acceptance of the *pseudos* by the philosopher is not guided by *apate*, but by *aletheia* (truth). He is accepting the deception for the sake of truth, not for the sake of deception itself. This is even clearer in another dialogue in which the same Theaetetus (who gives his name to the dialogue), and Socrates are confronting themselves with the issue of false opinion:

SOCRATES: We may sum up thus: it seems that in the case of things we do not know and have never perceived, there is no possibility of error or of false judgment, if what we are saying is at all sound; it is in cases where we both know things and are perceiving them that judgment is erratic and varies between truth and falsity. When it brings together the proper stamps and records directly and in straight lines, it is true; when it does so obliquely and crosswise, it is false.

THEAETETUS: Well, isn't that beautiful, Socrates? (*Theaet*. 194b)[24]

The *doxa* saves the *logos*. If the *doxa* is part of the *logos* and it is entitled to be false, then the *logos* can contain falsity. What happens next is that, if there is a correspondence between *logos* and being, as assumed earlier, then being can contain some form of not-being in the same way as *logos* contains some form of falsity. It is a matter of *symploke* (weaving), where not-being is somehow interwoven into being. This is not dangerous on a philosophical level, as far as it is seen for what it is: something that goes in straight lines or something that goes crosswise.

In the second place, the existential deception of the sophist needs to be considered. It is in the attempt of defining who the sophist is that the Stranger and Theaetetus get trapped in many *aporiai*. Seemingly, the same existence of the sophist proves that deception exists. The sophist, in fact, is essentially deceptive and with his *apate* he pretends to be – or he even believes himself to be – a *sophos* (wise man) while he is indeed an *eidolon* of a *sophos*. Conversely, with much more modesty, the philosopher is simply a lover (*philos*) of wisdom (*sophia*). Significantly, the sophist is defined in opposition and completion to the philosopher.

The *Sophist* begins by introducing Socrates to the Visitor from Elea, who is said to be "very much a philosopher."[25] Socrates tries to verify this and in doing so says something very relevant about appearances:

> Certainly the genuine philosophers who "haunt our cities – by contrast to the fake ones – take on all sorts of different appearances just because of other people's ignorance. […] Sometimes they take on the appearance of statesmen, and sometimes of sophists. Sometimes, too, they might give the impression that they're completely insane. (*Soph*. 216c–d)

24 Translated by Levett, rev. by Burnyeat, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

25 *Soph*. 216a.

Mimesis strikes again. The fundamental issue is not simply that the sophist is an *eidolon* of the philosopher, but that this *eidolon* can be substituted for the *eidos* in its appearance,[26] so that even the original can be confused with the copy. Undoubtedly, this can happen only by virtue of ignorance; nevertheless, it is relevant to explain how to avoid this ignorance: namely, by means of the philosophical method *par excellence*, the dialectic. Hence, the reason to start talking about the sophist and to define him stems from the proximity of the philosopher to the sophist (the same proximity between *eidos* and *eidolon*). Even Socrates himself is named "sophist" on different occasions. This means that the philosopher and the sophist can be confused, as they appear similar:

> THEAETETUS: But there's a similarity between a sophist and what we've been talking about.
>
> VISITOR: And between a wolf and a dog, the wildest thing there is and the gentlest. If you're going to be safe, you have to be especially careful about similarities, since the type we're talking about is very slippery. Anyway, let that description of them stand. I certainly don't think that when the sophists are enough on their guard the dispute will be about an unimportant distinction. [...] let's say that within education, according to the way the discussion has turned now, the refutation of the empty belief in one's own wisdom is nothing other than our noble sophistry.
>
> THEAETETUS: Let's say that. But the sophist has appeared in lots of different ways. So I'm confused about what expression or assertion could convey the truth about what he really is. (*Soph*. 231a–b)

This analogy stresses that to confuse an *eidolon* with its *eidos* is not an innocent, intellectual mistake; it can be dangerous, especially when dealing with someone who appears in so many ways. The wilderness of sophistics[27] also recurs in the *Republic*. It is meant in a similar way and, again, it addresses the

26 On this close and twisting relation between the sophist and the philosopher, cf. Cassin, 2014, 1.1.

27 Here it is used the term "sophistics" in the full sense of the neologism introduced by Barbara Cassin: "The set of doctrines or teachings associated with the individuals known as the sophists is *sophistike*, in French *sophistique*. The expression is lacking in English, which puts one in the position of either using the adjectives 'sophistic' or 'sophistical,' or to use the dismissive expression 'sophistry.' As I argue for a systematic role of these

danger represented by the sophist.[28] More specifically, in the *Republic* Socrates recalls the episode when Thrasymachus, a teacher of the rhetoric art, reacted in a very aggressive way against Socrates. Literally, Thrasymachus "coiled himself up as a beast ready to spring" and seemed to want to tear apart Socrates by roaring something to him. Socrates was afraid and trembled, paralysed and muted for a few minutes; nevertheless, he managed to confront Thrasymachus and contained the sophistic arguments of the rhetorician.[29]

The different ways the sophist appears to denounce him as being intrinsically an *eidolon* and living in a world of appearance where different *eidola*, in virtue of their essential inconsistency, can be interchangeable. This explains why he is said to be many-headed,[30] very similar to the way Ion is addressed by Socrates: "Really, you're just like Proteus,[31] you twist up and down and take many different shapes, till finally you've escaped me altogether."[32]

First, it is difficult to identify the sophist; secondly and consequently, it is easy to be deceived by him. Nevertheless, it is necessary to unmask him because it can be dangerous to go wrong about him.

The danger presented by the sophist is the loss of the *logos*. The sophist can paralyse and mute anyone who is confronting him, in the same way as, according to mythology, the above-mentioned wolf does[33] and in the same way as a Gorgon does.

The Gorgons are mythological characters; they are three sisters with snakes instead of hair on their heads, a beard on their chins, boar-like teeth[34] and a petrifying gaze (whoever crossed before their eyes was petrified).

doctrines, I will ask your indulgence and introduce the neologism 'sophistics' for now." (Cassin, 2014, 1.I).

28 Cf. Mati, 2010, p. 44. In the *Republic*, poetry is always associated with a dog barking: "there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy, which is evidenced by such expressions as 'the dog yelping and shrieking at its master' […]" (*Resp*. 608b).

29 *Resp*. 336b ff.

30 *Soph*. 240c.

31 *Ion* 541e. Proteus is an old sea-god famous for being a revealer of truth. In fact, according to the myths he was omniscient and unable to lie; for this reason, many tried to catch him in the sea and force him to speak out the truth about anything. In order to escape from his hunters, Proteus would assume any shape depending on his needs, even the shape of water. Cf. Homer, *Odyssey*, IV, 354 and Hesiod, *Theogony* 233; cf. also Kerényi, 2009, pp. 47–50.

32 *Ion* 542a.

33 Cf. Mati, 2010, pp. 43–44.

34 Vernant, 1982, p. 55.

In a seemingly irrelevant passage of the *Symposium*, Socrates recalls a verse from the *Odyssey*[35] but he modifies it either unintentionally, as a lapsus, or intentionally, as a pun. Whichever of the two interpretations is preferred, Plato is in any case putting in place an example of Socratic irony:

> How am I not going to be tongue-tied, I or anyone else, after a speech delivered with such beauty and variety? The other parts may not have been so wonderful, but that at the end! Who would not be struck dumb on hearing the beauty of the words and phrases? Anyway, I was worried that I'd not be able to say anything that came close to them in beauty, and so I would almost have run away and escaped, if there had been a place to go. And, you see, the speech reminded me of Gorgias, so that I actually experienced what Homer describes: I was afraid that Agathon would end by sending the Gorgian head, awesome at speaking in a speech, against my speech, and this would turn me to stone by striking me dumb. (*Symp*. 198b–c)[36]

The original verses by Homer, of course, say "Gorgon head" and not "Gorgian head." Intentionally or not, Socrates is establishing an equivalence between sophistics and petrification. Socrates quotes this verse immediately after hearing a speech about Eros by Agathon (who is hosting the symposium at his venue), a poet disciple of the sophist Gorgias and a sophist himself. Socrates is about to perform his own speech, but he is in *aporia*, immobilised and muted by the exhibition of the sophistic art.

Naming nothingness and using it as something real may even paralyse. The proximity to nothingness may lead to a form of nihilism, not only in speech, but ultimately in being. In a certain way, it can be said that the major risk is that the sophist takes Parmenides even more literally than a philosopher would, as to demonstrate that nothingness has the same extent of being. This is what Gorgias does himself: twisting, turning and manipulating words with violence for the sake of pure contradiction; this is, in general, a typical trait of sophistics.

In a passage from Sextus Empiricus, it is possible to read an elaboration of the work by Gorgias entitled *On What Is Not*. The original version of Gorgia's work has not reached us; however, Sextus Empiricus who had access to the original, having recognised its relevance, made an accurate summary of the principal issues it dealt with. Here it is quoted only a section of the long summary:

35 Homer, *Odyssey*, XI, 633–635.

36 Translated by Nehamas and Woodruff, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

> If there is anything, either there is what is or what is not, or there is both what is and what is not. But neither is there what is, as he will establish, nor what is not, as he will explain, nor what is *and* what is not, as he will also teach. Therefore there is not anything. Now, there is not what is not. For if there is what is not, it will both be and not be at the same time; in so far as it is considered as not being, it will not be, but in so far as what is not is, it will on the other hand be. But it is completely absurd that something should both be and not be at the same time; therefore there is not what is not. And besides, if there is what is not, there will not be what is; for these are the opposites of one another, and if being is an attribute of what is not, not being will be an attribute of what is. But it is *not* the case that there is not what is; neither will there be what is not. (*Adversus Mathematicos*, VII 66–67)

This is where the Parmenidean logics leads, to the coincidence of *being* and *not being*, with the outcome that *not being* completely overshadows *being*. Everything is immobilised: first *being* is annihilated by *logos* and then *logos* is annihilated by *not being*, causing an absolute silence, like a stone. It seems evident now that to commit the parricide of Parmenides is actually in the interest of the philosopher more than in the interest of the sophist.

This is the act of violence, very similar to a sophistic act, that Theaetetus and Socrates decide to undertake:

> VISITOR: Not to think that I'm turning into some kind of patricide. [...] In order to defend ourselves we're going to have to subject father Parmenides' saying to further examination, and insist by brute force both that *that which is not* somehow is, and then again that *that which is* somehow is not.
>
> THEAETETUS: It does seem that in what we're going to say, we'll to have to fight through that issue.
>
> VISITOR: That's obvious even to a blind man, as they say. We'll never be able to avoid having to make ourselves ridiculous by saying conflicting things whenever we talk about false statements and beliefs, either as copies or likenesses or imitations or appearances, or about whatever sorts of expertise there are concerning those things—unless, that is, we either refute Parmenides' claims or else agree to accept them. (*Soph.* 241d–e)[37]

37 Italics in this passage are not mine. Cf. Plato, 1997.

Every detail in this manifesto of enterprise is extremely valuable and coherent; the entire *Sophist* is, in fact, the story of the attempt to prove, on a dialectical basis, that *what is not* may be and *what is* may not be.[38] The solution to this logical riddle requires a dismantling of the Parmenidean ontology, to eventually find out that *being* and *not being* are interwoven. This operation implies a redemption of the ontological status of *eidolon* at different levels. Firstly, and most evidently, the *eidolon* is redeemed at the level of the *logos*. On one side, this makes the speech free to name "not-being" and to say falsities; on the other side, it makes the speech subject to judgement and discernment between truth and things that do not really exist. Consequently, it is also possible to believe hypotheses that are approximated to truth, and this is possible in virtue of a legitimate distinction between *doxa* and *episteme*. Thirdly, the redemption of the *eidolon* has some relevance on an existential level, as the sophist is now allowed to exist in his full regalia, but he is invested with responsibility for what he says, especially when he speaks about nothingness. On this existential level, though, the operation makes the sophist and the philosopher more related, as in some ways they are interwoven together and need to be carefully distinguished. Fourthly and lastly, the *eidolon* is finally redeemed in its own realm, the realm of the image. The image/copy is no longer an *apate* opposed to the truth of the *eidos*; it is still a copy but partially true and partially false, no longer either completely true or completely false. It could be said that the complex logical articulation of the *Sophist* sheds new light on the mimetic mechanism, making it smoother, a continuous stream of *poiesis*, and no longer a deceptive, reproductive tool. Hence, the poet, the painter and all the *mimetai* can be free to create, but the range of their freedom should be as wide as the range of their responsibility.

3 Mirrors and *Paidia*

To elevate the *logos* to a higher ontological level, the ontology of the image comes to support the logic of the philosophical argument against the deception of the sophist; in exchange, the *logos* redeems the image. Even though its existence is ontologically accepted, the image/copy nevertheless keeps

38 Not casually this operation is symbolically undertaken by the Visitor from Elea, a stranger (*xenos*), who in traditional Greek culture represents alterity, to be respected as holy and to be welcomed unconditionally. Cf. Curi, 2010, pp. 98–101.

dwelling in deception and the philosopher keeps denouncing it. The most relevant thing to remember about the image is that it is not representing things as they are, but as they seem, as a mirror does. The references to the mirror that occur in different parts of Plato's dialogues have to be intended in this way, as exempla of deceptive image-making.

It seems that, once the problem of *mimesis* (hence the problem of *poiesis*) is overcome and integrated on an ontological level, it is still necessary to clarify some problematic aspects related to the multiplicity and partiality provoked by *mimesis* on an epistemological level. This is where the analogy of the mirror (intended to mean any reflecting surface) comes to help. A mirror is usually considered one of the most reliable ways to reproduce accurate images of objects and people. It is apparently as objective as possible, and any form of intentionality on the part of the mirror can be excluded. The mirror does not want to deceive intentionally; nevertheless, whoever looks at the mirror can be deceived because it does not make things for what they are, but for what they seem. This clarifies why this further analysis of the *eidola* is set on an epistemological level, because it depends mainly on the beliefs (*doxai*) of the observers.

The reasons that Plato offers to explain why the mirror causes deception are twofold. The first immediately arises in some of the circumstances when the mirror is mentioned in the dialogues; the second is more implicit, as it is based on a specific, and different, conception of the mirror by Plato. Although it is extremely obvious, it is worth to explicit that the analogy of the mirror is often connected with the issue of *mimesis* and its criticism.

The first reason has to do with the problem of the multiplicity of the *eidola*. The mirror, just like a painter, a poet, a rhapsode and a sophist,[39] is able to produce any sort of thing without discernment:

> It isn't hard: You could do it quickly and in lots of places, especially if you were willing to carry a mirror with you, for that's the quickest way of all. With it you can quickly make the sun, the things in the heavens, the earth, yourself, the other animals, manufactured items, plants, and everything else mentioned just now. (*Resp*. 596 d–e)

As seen at different points in this work, the ability to produce the *eidola* of many things is equivalent to not being able to produce anything specifically (by virtue of a lack of *techne*). Also, by not deciding what to reproduce and how

39 Cf. *Soph.* 239d–240a.

to reproduce it, the mirror is extremely powerful as it replicates the mimetic mechanism without intermediation: suddenly, unintentionally and without taking any responsibility for it. The mirror is the material exemplification of the mimetic mechanism; it is like the gears of a clock that gives back the time, but not necessarily the right time (and surely, it is not *the time*). The mirror exhibits and reveals the tricks of *mimesis*.

The second reason has to do with the partiality of the *eidola* made by the mirror. In the Greek literary tradition, and conventionally, the mirror is considered a tool which gives back a correct and faithful image. Plato seems to deny this convention. Keeping in mind that, according to Plato, the only positive form of *mimesis* is the one which respects proportions (*eikastike mimesis*), it follows that the mirror cannot be trustworthy because it can only give back a partial image that depends on the perspective and the positioning of both the mirror and the person or object reflected in the mirror. The mirror, as with Platonic *mimesis* in general, "can give back only a small part of each thing and a part that is itself only an image. And that, it seems, is why it can produce everything."[40]

Every image reproduced by a mirror is always partial; furthermore, it does not have an independent life, but is always dependent on the original (while a painting, once created, keeps existing without the model) – much as shadows are stitched to everything and everyone. The existential relations between *eidos* and *eidolon* are stronger in this type of mechanical *mimesis*. This makes the *eidola* that come out from this form of *mimesis* more innocent in some ways, primarily because they are not intentional, but also because they can never replace the *eidos* as they need to exist at the same time, along with it.

This last point is quite relevant in relation to the *mimesis* implied in the criticisms of both writing and orality. In fact, one of the problematic aspects of *mimesis*, also detected by Derrida,[41] is that, once created, the *eidola* could aim to substitute the original and live independently from it. This is where, again, *mimesis* can become dangerous: in withdrawing from the ontological web of its mechanism. Written words can exist independently, abandoned on paper, as orphans without genealogy, hence, without responsibility; similarly, a speech, once learned by heart, can exist independently from its source. Consequently, the analogy of the mirror cannot be taken to explain the complexity of the mimetic mechanism extensively, but can surely be taken as a paradigm to exhibit the mechanism itself and its undeniable partiality.

40 *Resp*. 598b.
41 Particularly in the essay "Plato's Pharmacy" in Derrida, 1981.

By considering all these elements, it can be held that Plato, most likely, aimed to protect the unity and integrity of the *eide* more so than denigrating the *eidola*. The *eidola* in themselves are not meant to be seriously problematic; indeed, they are not serious at all. The risk though, is that they might substitute for the *eide* and so eb. This is also a reason for compromising in favour of the *eikasia* (similarity), but never in favour of the *homoiotetes* (identity) of the *eidolon* in relation to the *eidos* – the *eidos* is identical only to the *eidos*,[42] as explicated by this example in the *Cratylus*:

> SOCRATES: […] Would there be two things – Cratylus and an image of Cratylus – in the following circumstances? Suppose some god didn't just represent your color and shape the way painters do, but made all the inner parts like yours, with the same warmth and softness, and put motion, soul, and wisdom like yours into them – in a word, suppose he made a duplicate of everything you have and put it beside you. Would there then be two Cratyluses or Cratylus and an image of Cratylus?
>
> CRATYLUS: It seems to me, Socrates, that there would be two Cratyluses.
>
> SOCRATES: So don't you see that we must look for some other kind of correctness in images and in the names we've been discussing, and not insist that if a detail is added to an image or omitted from it, it's no longer an image at all. Or haven't you noticed how far images are from having the same features as the things of which they are images?
>
> CRATYLUS: Yes, I have.
>
> SOCRATES: At any rate, Cratylus, names would have an absurd effect on the things they name, if they resembled them in every respect, since all of them would then be duplicated, and no one would be able to say which was the thing and which was the name. (*Crat.* 432b–d)

42 This argument is in line with the interpretation given by Lidia Palumbo. She points out that one of the main claims in the *Sophist* is that the images exist in virtue of their *eikasia* (similarity), and this is not negative in itself; the falsity and the deception of the image take place only when the image wants to substitute and become identical to the original (Palumbo, 2008, pp. 50–63).

An image is an image (*eidolon*), it could never be identical (*homoios*), and it cannot be a clone. This is a matter of ontology, it is the entire sense of *mimesis* both for the images and for the words.

Hence, the mirror, at a first glance, may scare off and challenge the logic of ontology, presenting something like a *homoios*, but the image that it offers does not contain any structural geometry in what it represents, it does not have any intentionality, it does not have an inner structure of sense – it is an unanimated, merely superficial (on the level of the surface) appearance. Yet, in other relevant circumstances in the dialogues, the mirror is considered an analogy of the identity accessible only through a relational alterity.[43]

In light of the above, a link can be made to the charge of scarce earnestness of the *eidola* which recurs often in different parts of the Platonic dialogues. The lack of earnestness is actually imputed to the *mimesis* itself, as if it is a joke (*paidia*)[44] which works by virtue of its similarity with reality, but then the *pseudos* contained in it reveals that it cannot be taken seriously. This is generically valid for any form of *mimesis*:

> VISITOR: Do you know of any game [*paidia*] that involves more expertise than imitation does, and is more engaging?
>
> THEAETETUS: No, not at all, since you've collected everything together and designated a very broad, extremely diverse type. (*Soph.* 234b)

Regarding this passage, Stanley Rosen[45] argues that the "type" just designated is the *paidia* and that it falls under the category of the *mimesis*. Nevertheless, claims Rosen, this is problematic because this type of *paidia* seems to include both a negative *mimesis* (that of the sophist) and a potentially good form of *mimesis* (that of the philosopher). Seemingly, the Visitor and Theaetetus are saying that any form of *mimesis* is a joke. Even admitting that this is true, it is nevertheless partial. In fact, after a few lines in the dialogue, it follows the distinction between the two types of image-making (*eikastike mimesis*; *phantastike mimesis*). In this way, the distinction between the *mimesis* of the philosopher and the *mimesis* of the sophist gets clarified.

43 *Alc. I* 132e–133a; *Phaedr*. 255d.

44 It is suggested translating *paidia* rather as "joke," instead of "game" or "play". In fact, a game and the act of playing are things to be taken seriously in their performance, even if they have a fictitious and imitative character. Plato refers often to *paidia* as something that cannot be taken seriously, which is why the term "joke" would work better.

45 Rosen, 1983, pp. 166 ff.

Rosen's point seems quite weak, especially when compared with other occurrences of the association between *mimesis* and *paidia*. Most of the passages in which Plato considers *mimesis* a *paidia* are related to the arts, specifically poetry and painting. This is stated in the *Republic*, as clearly as possible:

> It seems, then, that we're fairly well agreed that an imitator has no worthwhile knowledge of the things he imitates, that imitation is a kind of game and not something to be taken seriously, and that all the tragic poets, whether they write in iambics or hexameters, are as imitative as they could possibly be. (*Resp*. 602b)[46]

In line with this, there is also a passage from the *Statesman*:

> VISITOR: Would we want to put down as a fifth class things to do with decoration, painting, and those representations [*mimeseis*] that are completed by the use of painting, and of music, which have been executed solely to give us pleasures, and which would appropriately be embraced by a single name?
>
> YOUNG SOCRATES: What name?
>
> VISITOR: I think we talk about something we call a "plaything" [...] this one name will be fittingly given to all of them; for not one of them is for the sake of a serious purpose, but all are done for amusement. (*Pol.* 288c)

Hence, if there is a commonality in the conception of *mimesis* as a joke, it is not between the philosopher and the sophist – as Rosen claims; rather, the commonality is between the artist and the sophist. Furthermore, these passages have been quoted in sequence to show that, at least in regard to this critical aspect of *mimesis*, there is a substantial homogeneity in Plato's works.[47]

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46 On mimetic art as a joke cf. also *Resp*. 606c.

47 Another relevant passage in line with the previous passages can be found in the *Epinomis*. However, this is not quoted as the main source in this work as the authenticity of the *Epinomis* is questionable. According to Diogenes Laertius (*Vitae philosophorum*, III, 37) the *Epinomis* was added by Plato's student, Philip of Opus, as a last book to conclude the *Laws*.
The passage is the following: "Next in order is a kind of play, which is mostly imitative and in no way serious. Its practitioners make use of many instruments and many bodily gestures—and not wholly becoming ones at that. This includes skills that employ words,

Consequently, there is not much room to doubt that this analogy implies that some types of *mimesis*, those that create *phantasmata*, as many arts do, are like the type of *mimesis* that rules a joke. A joke is not something intrinsically bad, but its outcomes are not serious, nor worth discussing. This is probably the most adequate interpretation of this vast analogy which finds evidence in a determinant passage from Plato's last work, the *Laws*:[48]

ATHENIAN: Yes, and it is precisely this that I call "play" [*paidia*], when it has no particular good or bad effect that deserves serious discussion. [...] And we could conclude from all this that no imitation at all should be judged by reference to incorrect opinions about it or by the criterion of the pleasure it gives. This is particularly so in the case of every sort of equality. What is equal is equal and what is proportional is proportional, and this does not depend on anyone's opinion that it is so, nor does it cease to be true if someone is displeased at the fact. Accuracy, and nothing else whatever, is the only permissible criterion.

CLINIAS: Yes, that is emphatically true.

ATHENIAN: So do we hold that all music is a matter of representation and imitation?

CLINIAS: Of course.

ATHENIAN: So when someone says that music is judged by the criterion of pleasure, we should reject his argument out of hand, and absolutely refuse to go in for such music (if any were ever produced) as a serious *genre*. The music we ought to cultivate is the kind that bears a resemblance to its model, beauty. (*Leg*. 667e–668b)[49]

This passage is relevant on many levels. It is worth pointing to a preliminary level that is also central to the passage from the *Statesman* quoted above. It is

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all the arts of the Muses, and the genres of visual representation, which are responsible for producing many varied figures in many media, both wet and dry. But the imitative art makes no one wise in any of these things, even those who practice their craft with the utmost seriousness." (*Epin*. 975d). Translated by McKirahan, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

48 According to tradition, Plato met his death while trying to complete his last work, the *Laws*. Quite symbolically, in his last work, the character of Socrates is completely absent. In this work, Plato shows a more concrete and complete (including also at a cosmological level) vision of politics, as compared to the *Republic* or even to the *Statesman*.

49 Translated by Saunders, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

about the pleasure and amusement provoked by jokes and by the mimetic arts. Pleasure, as an effect of *mimesis*, is not denied nor denigrated; nevertheless, it should be rejected as a criterion of judgement. This is the very same point that, with other arguments and in another context, Plato makes against the mimetic arts in the *Republic*: the mimetic arts are delightful, their pleasure is undeniable, but they are not bearers of truth. They do not have an epistemological value; hence, they cannot have an educational role. Even worse, they are dangerous for the souls of the young as well as for the souls of the well-rounded citizens.

It can be said that the antidote necessary to cure the souls poisoned by mimetic poetry is outlined in a clearer way in the *Laws.* In the *Republic* Plato affirms that "such poetry is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug to counteract it."[50] In the *Laws* there seems to be a valid counteracting drug, which is accuracy (*aletheia* – usually translated as truth), as the only criterion valid to judge the products of *mimesis*. A criterion of objectivity for the mimetic arts has been found, but this would not have been possible without making the distinction between *eikastike mimesis* and *phantastike mimesis* in the *Sophist*. In fact, accuracy means that the mimetic mechanism between the *eidos* and the *eidolon* is ruled by equality (*isotes*) and proportion (*symmetria*); these are indeed the criteria of the *eikastike mimesis*.

A *mimesis* that respects the geometry intrinsic in the *eidos* and makes the *eidolon* proportionate seems to be the only acceptable form of *mimesis*. This strict conception of *mimesis* is not based on a rejection of pleasure, but on the acknowledgement that *mimesis* does not simply relate to the senses, it informs too. Hence, even artistic *mimesis* involves knowledge and human judgement, which ultimately consists in the capability of discerning between truth and falsity, and between wrong and right:

> You have hit the nail on the head. So anyone who is going to be a sensible judge of any representation – in painting and music and every other field – should be able to assess three points: he must know, first, *what* has been represented; second, how *correctly* it has been copied; and then, third, the *moral value* of this or that representation produced by language, tunes and rhythms. (*Leg.* 669a–b)

50 *Resp.* 595b.

This brief and not exhaustive parenthesis on the pleasure of the arts serves only to prepare the ground for the consideration of another relevant aspect in that passage from the *Laws*.

Earlier it was argued that, in the *Sophist*, there is also a redemption of the *eidolon* in its ontological status. The patricide of Parmenides, although hurtful, allows the genres of being and not-being to interweave themselves in order to admit the existence of the similarity which is the specific trait of the image. Similarity does not exist as an independent genre in the *Sophist*,[51] but it comes into existence every time that the genre of diversity partakes in the genre of identity. Similarity could never have existed as an independent genre; it is dependent in the same way as *eidolon* is dependent on the *eidos* – no *eidola* could exist without an *eidos*.

If this is taken to its consequences, it emerges that everything in the human condition is a matter of *mimesis.* Everything that comes into being springs out from a *poiesis* and necessarily partakes in the genres of being and identity. Subsequently, since it is the only genre which partakes in all the other genres, the genre of difference also partakes in being and identity, producing *eidola* of everything. The philosopher, living in the realm of *mimesis*, is affected by this too and he knows it. The full awareness of living in the realm of *mimesis* makes the philosopher in charge of distinguishing between good and bad *mimesis*, between jokes and good music, between *eikasia* and *phantasia*, and so he does. Nevertheless, by correctly judging every form of *mimesis*, the philosopher cannot escape his own participation in the realm of *mimesis*. The philosopher is a *mimetes* too, but a good *mimetes*, who invites the cultivation of the best type of music, that one which is a proportionate *eidolon* of the *eidos* of beauty.

The passage from the *Laws* also clarifies retrospectively a seemingly autobiographical episode narrated by Socrates in the *Phaedo*:

> The same dream often came to me in the past, now in one shape now in another, but saying the same thing: "Socrates," it said, "practice and cultivate the arts."[52] In the past I imagined that it was instructing and advising me to do what I was doing, such as those who encourage runners in a

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51 The five genres in the *Sophist* are: being; identity; difference; stillness; movement. Every genre is independent, but the genre of difference participates in all the other genres. Cf. *Soph.* 255e ff.

52 "The arts" is a translation for the term *mousike* which literally means "the arts of the Muses." Sometimes this passage is translated as "practice and cultivate music" so that it ends up saying that philosophy is the highest kind of music.

> race, that the dream was thus bidding me do the very thing I was doing, namely, to practice the art of philosophy, this being the highest kind of art, and I was doing that. (*Phaed.* 60e–61a)

The art of the philosopher encourages other people to cultivate his same art. However, what does this art consist in? Once again, this art consists primarily in being able to distinguish (*diairein*).

4 Shadows and Dialectic

It is possible to understand the art of the philosopher and its ontological collocation by quoting a sample of this art itself. The passage below is the initial part of the conclusive movement of *diairesis* and *synagoge* in the *Sophist.* It is the beginning of the last and exhaustive attempt to define the sophist:

> VISITOR: I'll assume divine expertise produces the things that come about by so-called nature, and that human expertise produces the things that humans compound those things into. According to this account there are two kinds of production, human and divine. […] Since there are two of them, cut each of them in two again. […] That way there are four parts of it all together, two human ones related to us and two divine ones related to the gods. […] Then if we take the division we made the first way, one part of each of those parts is the production of originals. Just about the best thing to call the two parts that are left might be "copy-making." That way, production is divided in two again. […] We know that we human beings and the other living things, and also fire, water, and things like that, which natural things come from, are each generated and produced by a god. Is that right? […] And there are copies of each of these things, as opposed to the things themselves, that also come about by divine workmanship.
>
> THEAETETUS: What kinds of things?
>
> VISITOR: Things in dreams, and appearances that arise by themselves during the day. They're shadows when darkness appears in firelight, and they're reflections when a

thing's own light and the light of something else come together around bright, smooth surfaces and produce an appearance that looks the reverse of the way the thing looks from straight ahead. [...] And what about human expertise? We say housebuilding makes a house itself and drawing makes a different one, like a human dream made for people who are awake.

THEAETETUS: Of course. (*Soph.* 265e–266e)

The distinction continues for a while in an articulated way, from one passage to another, when the Visitor takes a breath to express a personal evaluation: "Some imitators know what they're imitating and some don't. And what division is more important than the one between ignorance and knowledge?" The philosopher and the sophist, once again, fall into the same general category (human production as opposed to divine production) and live in the same realm of *mimesis*. However, with his activity, the philosopher proves his own capability and his own art: he knows what he is imitating, he is on the side of knowledge; the sophist, instead, is on the other side, deliberately. This means that the sophist knows that his art is deceitful. Both the philosopher and the sophist know that they do not know. They know they live among the *eidola*, but if on one side this pushes the philosopher to undertake a quest towards the truth of the *eide*, on the other side, this same ignorance is where the sophist decides to dwell and to perform his art.

The conclusive definition of the sophist does not have a taste of victory in a hunt; it rather has a bitter and dramatic tone. The *eidola* spring out with any creative act, not only in the *poiesis* of human beings, but also in the *demiourgia* of the gods. The real difference consists in deciding whether to know or ignore this.

This extremely complicated way of articulating the ontology of the image has to be considered in the most serious way. Plato is the aware and intentional bearer of a cultural revolution which shook the roots of archaic Greek thought and posited the basis of our western conception of the ontology of the image and co-extensively of ontology itself. That among the divine productions there are *eidola*, and that these *eidola* do *exist*, could not have been said straightforwardly, but needed a slow and complicated path.

The *eidola* produced by divine creation, says the Visitor, are things in dreams (*ta en tois hypnois*), shadows (*skia*), reflections (*diploi*).[53] According to Jean-Pierre

53 Literally "the doubled things," meaning all reflections in mirrors and other types of reflecting surfaces.

Vernant, these three types of *eidola* correspond to the three ways archaic Greek culture identified the *eidolon*. In archaic thought the *eidolon* could present itself as a dream (*onar*), or as an apparition caused by a god (*phasma*), or else as the ghost of someone deceased (*psyche*).[54] The correspondence seems to work, but with Plato, the concept of *eidolon* changes its ontological status.

In archaic thought, the *eidolon* was intended as a double which at the same time existed (for the eyes) and did not exist (materially). Some examples of this can be found in the *Odyssey* when the souls of the dead appear to those alive, but when the living try to hug or touch the appearing souls, they simply vanish, revealing their real non-existence in the human world.[55] It can be said that the archaic *eidola* belonged to another world, but nevertheless they could appear in the human world almost like hallucinations. The realms from which these *eidola* derive are "elsewhere" and parallel, such as the realm of dreams, the realm of the gods, and the realm of the dead.

For Plato instead, the *eidola* do not derive from parallel realms, but are inevitable outcomes of any form of production, because everything that exists is somehow subjugated by the mimetic mechanism. The human world is itself the realm of *mimesis* and, inevitably, it contains *eidola*. To include the *eidola* in the human world is the only way to put them under the surveillance and judgement of philosophy, although this leaves room for a risk, which is the manipulation of the sophist.

The recurrent Platonic analogy of the shadows is what exemplifies this the most. To believe that the shadows truly exist cannot be something wrong, but to believe that only shadows exist is a mistake derived from a deception. The allegory of the cave is probably the most famous and clear way to detect the relevance of this mistake. In fact, the prisoners in the cave truly believe that the shadows of the things they see at the bottom of the cave are the reality – indeed, that is the only reality they know. This false belief is the result of a biased and forced view. The prisoners in the cave have been chained since childhood and their faces are immobilised in such a way that they can only look in front of them. If they could turn their backs towards the wall behind them, they would see the statues which cast the shadows at the bottom of the cave, revealing the deception of the *mimesis*. Simply, they would not think straightaway that shadows are not real (they would not deny their own reality); rather, they would understand that there are "truer things"[56] than shadows, as in fact shadows are

54 Vernant, 1982, pp. 124–125. On the souls of dead people as *eidola* in archaic culture, cf. also Vernant, 2006, pp. 325–326 and Carchia, 2003, pp. 131–132.

55 Cf. also *Men*. 100a.

56 *Resp*. 515d.

derivations and not independent entities. In this way, and this is what counts the most, they would also understand the tricks of the mimetic mechanism. Instead, the prisoners are forced into a portion of the realm of *mimesis*, the portion of the *eidola*. They do not seem to have access even to the most basic of human intuitions which is the mimetic mechanism, because their full reality is exposed in front of them, plain and readable, without derivation.

With the allegory of the cave, Plato means primarily to exemplify the effect of a good education, which would consist in unchaining the prisoners and leading them out of the cave. For this reason, the entire analogy is not taken extensively here, although it would still be highly beneficial to do so, as the many details of the allegory would reinforce the claim held throughout this work. Nevertheless, at this stage, it should be possibly clear enough that Plato's analogies need to be taken more seriously for their structure than for the precise correspondence of their terms of analogy.

When finally freed, the first prisoner learns the first exemplum of *mimesis*, that the shadows (his own reality) are derived from some statues placed on a wall, thanks to the light of a fire behind the wall. This exemplum is all the prisoners would need to learn in order to make their way out of the cave. This does not mean that the way out is an easy one; it actually gets more and more difficult upwards and it needs to be walked slowly, but everything the prisoner encounters on this path is based on the same mechanism as that one from which the shadows at the bottom of the cave were derived: the mimetic mechanism.

Significantly, when Glaucon expresses his very first reaction to Socrates' story, Socrates points to the mimetic mechanism again: this story may present a weird image (*atopon eikona*) and weird (*atopous*) prisoners, as Glaucon claims, but these prisoners are like Socrates and Glaucon (*homoious hemin*).[57] With the weird images of this allegory, Socrates is making a *mimesis* of his own status. In fact, he is forced to look at *eidola* and to be deceived by them; however, he has been freed (supposedly by his *daimon*),[58] hence he has obviously acknowledged the mimetic mechanism – in fact, he is using it by means of the allegory and is willing to walk the entire path until he is out of the cave and beyond it. The state of deception in which Socrates admits to being, along with Glaucon, is that one caused by the attempt to define justice (the *Republic*

57 *Resp.* 515a.

58 Cf. *Apol.* 29d–31a. Keeping the analogy proposed by the allegory, Socrates can be compared to that first prisoner who makes himself free (it is not clarified how) and then tries to convince the other prisoners to come out of the cave (out of their state of ignorance). The reaction of the prisoners is not very positive – they do not believe him to the point that they desire to kill him (*Resp.* 517a). Somehow, this resembles Socrates' destiny.

originated with this intent). The dialogue represents a difficult progression towards the *eidos* of justice where *mimesis* presents its deception at different and subtle ontological levels that require revisions, steps back and mainly the bitter awareness of dwelling among *eidola* most of the time. In the allegory, the path of the prisoner is summarised in a few passages: from the shadows in the cave, the prisoner goes upwards to the statues and the fire; from the statues the prisoner goes upwards to living entities, their shadows and the sun; then, he goes from the reflection of the sun to the sun itself; lastly from the sun itself to the understanding of how the sun sheds light on everything and gives structure and variation to the natural world. The path that Socrates and Glaucon keep walking is more complex, but similar in its outcomes:

> This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said before. The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it's true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it. (*Resp*. 517 b–c)

The form of the good, to which the form of justice is strictly linked, is like the sun. However, it is the human condition to dwell in the realm of *mimesis*, and even if the forms can be grasped, it can only be for a moment of clarity and not the normal condition of human sight, as this would be unbearable. Nevertheless, in the realm of *mimesis* human beings are not abandoned to the *eidola* only; the *eide* are accessible and create the conditions for the visibility of the *eidola*, even though the eyes cannot stare constantly at them. What matters the most for the philosopher is that he is always able to distinguish the *eidolon* from the *eidos* and that he is always on the path towards something truer using the dialectical method.

This same analogy is used in a similar way in the *Phaedo*, one of the most biographical dialogues by Plato, narrating the last days of Socrates and declaring the sense (and the defence) of his philosophical enterprise:

> After this, he said, when I had wearied of investigating things, I thought that I must be careful to avoid the experience of those who watch an eclipse of the sun, for some of them ruin their eyes unless they watch its reflection in water or some such material. A similar thought crossed my mind, and I feared that my soul would be altogether blinded if I looked at things with my eyes and tried to grasp them with each of my senses. So I thought I must take refuge in discussions and investigate the truth of things by means of words. However, perhaps this analogy is inadequate, for I certainly do not admit that one who investigates things by means of words is dealing with images any more than one who looks at facts. (*Phaed.* 99d–100a)

By means of *logoi* the philosopher progresses on the path towards the truth; but, as already discussed, the *logoi* are weak and it is anyway impossible to fully overcome the implications of the images.[59] The mimetic mechanism is intrinsic in the *logoi*, which are the tools of the philosopher, and the reason why any attempt to grasp an *eidos* by means of *logoi*, although extremely refined and approximated to truth with the flexibility of the dialectic method, always creates a distance from the *eidos* itself. It could be said that *logoi* are the instruments through which the philosopher tries to perform his own *mimesis*, which is an *eikastike mimesis* aiming to dissect and reveal the inner geometry that constitutes the *eide*.

If on the one hand the *logoi* are a refuge for the philosopher, on the other hand this refuge does not protect the philosopher from being exposed to the mimetic mechanism, and hence does not protect him from the risks of the *eidola*.

Ironically enough, the way in which the *logoi* can be approximated to the *eide* is with more *logoi*, by adding up more and more *diairesis* and *synagoge* at each stage, and thus by making the dialectic path as long and as well-developed as possible. The advantage that the *logoi* have in opposition to the visual *eidola* is that they are not as immediate, and consequently not immediately deceptive; they require a lot of work and they can be used as tools towards the truth. In addition, even though there is a high degree of difficulty, the *logoi* work best in a common enterprise. Before deepening this aspect of commonality of the

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59 It needs to be clarified that the word used for image in this passage from the *Phaedo* is *eikon* and not *eidolon*. In this case, for the sake of our argument, it could be argued that the use of the two terms may be interchangeable. However, this equivalence is not always valid, not even in this dialogue cf. both *Phaed.* 66c and *Phaed.* 81d where the term *eikon* cannot be intended as *eidolon*.

logoi, it is worth underlining, once again, one of the main issues in this work. In fact, at this stage, enough elements have been gathered to reassess the position on the orality/writing opposition in Plato in a more complete way.

As discussed at different stages, both the critique of writing and the critique of orality in Plato's works prove to be inessential if taken literally, and for this reason too they are not to be considered in opposition to each other. This alleged opposition, in virtue of which one should affirm its own superiority over the other, is not sustainable because the weakness of the *logoi* affects both written speech and oral speech. The reason Plato criticises the *logoi* is not primarily related to their being written nor being orally expressed; it has to do mainly with the mimetic mechanism intrinsic to their use. In other words, it has to do with the weakness of the *logoi* themselves and their close connection to the ontology of the image. The place where the critique of writing and the critique of orality resolve their supposed conflict is the critique of the deceptive image, which, in turn, has been integrated into the Platonic philosophical system as well. The *Sophist* also stands for a philosophical redemption of the deception: even the deception, when carefully identified and regulated, can be an integrative part of a philosophical system. This operation of inclusion and regulation of the deception is only partially deliberate; it is mostly inevitable, as it depends on the limited nature of the human soul.[60] Since human beings are also limited in the way they can gain, express and transmit knowledge, philosophy – although aware of this limitedness[61] – remains a limited tool and has to avail itself of images. The images are not always used to carry contents; however, the mechanism which carries contents is itself based on the ontology of the image discussed in this chapter. The entire human world is an expression of this mimetic relation exemplified by the ontology of the image. This aspect, which has been analysed on different levels so far, should still be considered at the cosmological level as interpreted by Plato.

Some mature Platonic works deal with cosmology, mainly the *Philebus* and the *Timaeus*. In these works, the Platonic arguments on the creation of the *kosmos* are nurtured by a complex ontology along with some geometrical and

60 Jill Gordon expresses it with a clear sentence: "That human beings are inherently limited, that philosophy is the appropriate medium for human inquiry due to our limitations, and that philosophy needs therefore to be carried out to some extent through images, are pervasive ideas in the Platonic corpus." In Scott, 2007, p. 220.

61 Drew Hyland, in his book *Finitude and Transcendence*, analyses the *Republic* as a model by which to interpret the entire Platonic production. He convincingly argues that Plato's philosophy represents a general attempt to transcend human limitedness/finitude through philosophy. Cf. Hyland, 1995.

mathematical theories.[62] The mimetic mechanism also persists as a neat element of continuity in this period of Platonic production, and it is still based on the ontology of the image. To show this legacy, it suffices to quote an explicative passage from the *Timaeus* in which the intrinsic human limitedness and its dependence on the ontology of the image emerge in the attempt to give an account of the creation of the human world itself.

> Since these things are so, it follows by unquestionable necessity that this world is an image of something. Now in every subject it is of utmost importance to begin at the natural beginning, and so, on the subject of an image [*eidolon*] and its model [*eidos*], we must make the following specification: the accounts we give of things have the same character as the subjects they set forth. […] Don't be surprised then, Socrates, if it turns out repeatedly that we won't be able to produce accounts on a great many subjects – on gods or the coming to be of the universe – that are completely and perfectly consistent and accurate. Instead, if we can come up with accounts no less likely than any, we ought to be content, keeping in mind that both I, the speaker, and you, the judges, are only human. So we should accept the likely tale on these matters. It behoves us not to look for anything beyond this. (*Tim.* 29b–d)[63]

The only means humans have for understanding what surrounds them is the *eidola*. This does not necessarily imply that the mimetic mechanism affects everything, it simply means that the way human beings can know is based on this mechanism. Moving upwards, out of the cave, the philosopher tries to transcend his condition and to grasp those things which are subjugated by *mimesis*, the *eide*. The philosopher can reach that level of understanding, but he cannot dwell there. Keeping the analogy of the cave, the philosopher can walk all the way out of the cave to look into the sun, but he would not be able to stare at it eternally. That vision would let him understand the nature of vision itself, but then, his destiny is to back down and divulge his partial knowledge in the realm of *mimesis*. This movement upwards and then downwards is mimetically reproduced in the movement of the dialectic method of the philosopher.[64]

62 Cf. Trabattoni, 2015, pp. 159–178.

63 Translated by Zeyl, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

64 On the path that leads the prisoner out of the cave, Socrates comments: "And what about this journey? Don't you call it dialectic?" (*Resp.* 532b) and shortly after continues: "Therefore, dialectic is the only inquiry that travels this road, doing away with hypotheses and proceeding to the first principle itself, so as to be secure. And when the eye of the soul is really buried in a sort of barbaric bog, dialectic gently pulls it out and leads it upwards,

The *eide*, as noted, can be grasped, but only temporarily and with a lot of effort:

> For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself. (*VII Ep.* 341c)

This quotation, already analysed in a different context in the first chapter, here offers a brilliant image of Plato's theory of human knowledge and brings the analysis back to where it was put aside, the commonality of the *logoi*. The *logoi*, although limited, can work better if the enterprise towards the truth is brought forwards commonly. It is quite evident that Plato considers the process of knowing to be strictly related to an educative relation; subsequently, at a higher level of access to the *eide*, the process of knowledge is grounded in an *erotic* relation.[65]

This need for relationality emerges in the dialogues mainly through the dialectic method of research and through the dialogic narrative structure of the dialogues themselves. The dialectical method implies the presence of at least another interlocutor, the bearer of a point of divergence and/or convergence; the dialogue is also a literary device which represents an exchange between at least two people. The path towards the truth needs to be walked and to be integrated reciprocally. The dialectical exchange is what respects most of all the vitality, fluidity and desire for transcendence typical of the human soul. The dialectic method is a path towards the truth in constant movement[66] that even when it reaches the *eidos* then goes back down and renews the quest. In this context, the antithetic model of knowledge presented by the sophist might be recalled. The sophist accomplishes his research by dwelling among the *eidola*; he is aware of the mimetic mechanism, but he chooses the apparent stability and solidity of what is

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using the crafts we described to help it and cooperate with it in turning the soul around." (*Resp.* 533c–d).

65 Both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the two main dialogues about the theme of *eros*, describe erotic relation as a form of relational dialectic through which the soul can reach the *eide* and become able to generate in the most authentic way.

66 In the *Cratylus* (439e–440c) Plato expressed the impossibility of knowing anything that is in constant movement, except by posing the existence of stable *eide*. In the stability of the *eide* it is possible to ground human knowledge which, due to the limitedness of human nature, is constantly changeable and fluid.

immediately reachable and knowable in the human condition. In other words, he prefers the finitude to the transcendence. The analogy of petrification here shows all its power: this type of sophistic knowledge petrifies the *logoi* with the *logoi* (either written or oral) and makes them empty, as they are not able to transcend and nurture the soul. The sophist, like the philosopher, performs a sort of *mimesis* of reality with the tool of the *logoi*, but the sophistic *mimesis* is deceptive and does not respect the vitality of the human soul, as it is limited to one aspect of reality while taking it for the whole – a synecdoche, as argued earlier. The philosopher, instead, uses the *logoi* as tools, but he transcends them; his *mimesis*, although *eikastike*, and hence rightly proportioned, is never exhaustive; it is always subject to failure and liable to integration and revision. In this way, the dialectic method and the dialogic style do not, and cannot, aim to mirror the truth, but they rather aim to keep alive the authentic desire of the soul for the truth.[67] It is as if the truth is not the end point of the path, but the path itself.[68] To mention a concrete example of this, the conclusive definition of the sophist in the homonymous dialogue can be considered. The definition of the sophist was a *resum*é of the entire path walked by the Visitor and Theaetetus; this path was challenging (it was stuck in *aporiai* many times), difficult (they even had to commit patricide) and provoked changes and growth in the souls of the two philosophers. This example, among many others, shows how dialectics can be the most realistic way to interpret the realm of *mimesis*, as it does not deny the multiplicity and partiality of the human world. Dialectics contemplates and includes organically the differences intrinsic in being. This, once again, is a conceptual revolution brought forth by Plato's philosophy.

Plato does not simply identify oppositions in the genres of being, he also finds a way to integrate them in a system of thought and, in a way, to express them. The dialectic method emerges from an *aporia* in the logic of being (the problem of contradiction): to solve the *aporia* of the human condition, the philosopher, instead of denying his own finitude and limitedness, creates a model which resembles it. If on the one hand, the human soul strives for transcendence and for the knowledge of the *eide*, on the other hand, this same soul is embedded in a realm of *mimesis*. The acceptance of this status

67 Cf. Candiotto, 2013.

68 On the reciprocal and dialectic nature of the Platonic dialogues, Pierre Hadot writes relevant pages (Hadot, 1995, pp. 89–93). To quote an example: "A dialogue is an itinerary of the thought, whose route is traced by the constantly maintained accord between questioner and respondent" (Hadot, 1995, p. 91).

does not prevent the philosopher from keeping on transcending it, although this transcendence is possible only relationally (the identity nurtured by the difference). As the allegory of the cave exemplifies, without the external intervention of "someone else," no one would be able to discover different levels of reality.[69] The relation with another human being not only permits access to the divine core of one's own soul,[70] but it also permits generation and hence the partaking in immortality. On this merit, the following passage from the *Symposium*, while describing the drama of human limitedness, subject to constant change, also reveals the way humans can partake in immortality:

> Even while each living thing is said to be alive and to be the same – as a person is said to be the same from childhood till he turns into an old man – even then he never consists of the same things, though he is called the same, but he is always being renewed and in other respects passing away, in his hair and flesh and bones and blood and his entire body. And it's not just in his body, but in his soul, too, for none of his manners, customs, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, or fears ever remains the same, but some are coming to be in him while others are passing away. And what is still far stranger than that is that not only does one branch of knowledge come to be in us while another passes away and that we are never the same even in respect of our knowledge, but that each single piece of knowledge has the same fate. […] And in that way everything mortal is preserved, not, like the divine, by always being the same in every way, but because what is departing and aging leaves behind something new, something such as it had been. By this device, Socrates," she said, "what is mortal shares in immortality, whether it is a body or anything else, while the immortal has another way. So don't be surprised if everything naturally values its own offspring, because it is for the sake of immortality that everything shows this zeal, which is Love." […] "Now, some people are pregnant in body, and for this reason turn more to women and pursue love in that way, providing themselves through childbirth with immortality and remembrance and happiness, as they think, for all time to come; while others are pregnant in soul – because there surely *are* those who are even more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies, and these are pregnant with what is fitting for a soul to bear and bring to birth. And

69 Cf. Fronterotta, 2001, p. 85.
70 *Alc. I* 132e–133a, *Phaedr*. 255d.

> what is fitting? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, which all poets beget, as well as all the craftsmen who are said to be creative." (*Symp*. 207d–209a)

Dialectics and relationality (educative and erotic) have the same structure: systematic and progressive, both lead, after a long and complex course, to a generative truth which, as noted, rather than being an end point is an evolving path.[71]

5 Beauty and Wonderment

The *aporiai* with which the philosopher is forced to be confronted are due to the weakness and limitedness of the human condition itself, but he is characterised by having the desire to look for a resource. This dialectic between misery (*penia*) and resource (*poros*) is the dialectic which generates Eros. In the *Symposium*, the priestess Diotima recalls the myth of the birth of the *daimon* Eros[72] who, being generated by the god *Poros* (father) and the mortal *Penia* (mother), is the embodiment of the *metaxy* (in-between). Eros is a *daimon* in between a god and a human: he is in between mortality and divinity; he is in between knowledge and ignorance; he is always in movement between opposites which are co-dependent. In fact, no one would look for a resource (*poros*) if they were not in a state of need (*penia*); this is a perfect dialectic movement brought forward by the generation of Eros who, in his turn, spreads the desire to generate among humans.

The authentic philosopher is guided by an authentic erotic desire, and this is testified by Socrates himself, who notoriously professes many times to know nothing…but one thing: *ta erotika*, the love issues.[73]

In the realm of *mimesis*, the power generated by the erotic desire is necessarily kindled by an *eidolon*. This is the only *eidolon* which eludes the mimetic mechanism:

71 On dialectics and erotic relationality intended as methods of truth, cf. Robin, 1908, p. 213, pp. 223–226, p. 251. However, Robin believes that in the Platonic system, *eros* is an inferior method of truth when compared to the dialectic method. The reasons to hold this position are well founded, nevertheless this position is not supported in this work, which rather maintains that the two methods work analogically in their structure and codependently in their striving.

72 *Symp*. 203b–204c.

73 Cf. *Symp.* 177d, 193e, 198d, 201d, 212b; *Lys.* 204b–c; *Phaedr.* 227c, 257a.

> Now beauty, as I said, was radiant among the other objects; and now that we have come down here we grasp it sparkling through the clearest of our senses. Vision, of course, is the sharpest of our bodily senses, although it does not see wisdom. It would awaken a terribly powerful love if an image[74] of wisdom came through our sight as clearly as beauty does, and the same goes for the other objects of inspired love. But now beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly visible and the most loved. Of course a man who was initiated long ago or who has become defiled is not to be moved abruptly from here to a vision of Beauty itself when he sees what we call beauty here; so instead of gazing at the latter reverently, he surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast, eager to make babies; and, wallowing in vice, he goes after unnatural pleasure too, without a trace of fear or shame. A recent initiate, however, one who has seen much in heaven – when he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time; then he gazes at him with the reverence due a god, and if he weren't afraid people would think him completely mad, he'd even sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god. Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings. Meanwhile, the heat warms him and melts the places where the wings once grew, places that were long ago closed off with hard scabs to keep the sprouts from coming back; but as nourishment flows in, the feather shafts swell and rush to grow from their roots beneath every part of the soul (long ago, you see, the entire soul had wings). (*Phaedr*. 250d–251b)

This passage from the *Phaedrus* is slightly out of context here as it refers to some aspects of Platonic psychology and the Platonic theory of love which are not dealt with in this work, such as the immortality of the soul and the Platonic theory of metempsychosis,[75] and also homoerotism and the traditional code of behaviour between lovers.[76] However, the relevance of this passage, and the impact it has had on the ongoing western conception of love and beauty, is so strong that it is possible to understand it and feel its power even if it is quoted

74 *Eidolon*.

75 Cf. Long, 1948.

76 In regard to these last aspects cf. Foucault, 1990, Vol. II, pp. 185–245.

out of context. It seems relevant, at this stage, to present it without too much of an introduction to leave its emotional effect intact.

On a second and more rigorous approach to this passage, what is relevant to highlight in regard to this work is the special status of the *eidolon* of beauty among the other *eidola*. Unless used in a manipulative way, as the sophist does, the *eidola* would not be able to stand and respond for themselves without the *eide*. This means that in each and every *eidolon* it is possible to glimpse its correspondent *eidos*. That is particularly effective for the *eidola* of beauty. Due to its specific visibility, the *eidos* of beauty shines forth frequently through the *eidola* in the realm of *mimesis* and kindles erotic desire in human beings:

> All of us are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul, and, as soon as we come to a certain age, we naturally desire to give birth. Now no one can possibly give birth in anything ugly; only in something beautiful. That's because when a man and a woman come together in order to give birth, this is a godly affair. Pregnancy, reproduction—this is an immortal thing for a mortal animal [...]
> What Love wants is not beauty, as you think it is.
> Well, what is it, then?
> Reproduction and birth in beauty. (*Symp*. 206 c–d)

This reproduction has somehow to do with *poiesis*, hence with *mimesis*, as discussed, but there is an enormous difference here. What is reproduced in love (*eros*), through beauty, is alive and responsible, as it always bears with it the creative energy of its *eidos*. It can be a human being, a work of art or a set of rules, but it bears with it the creative energy that made it exist and that, in this way, makes it partake in eternity over the finitude of its producer. However, the main specificity of the *eidola* of beauty lies in their unique relation to the *eidos* of beauty itself. As anticipated, the *eidola* of beauty seem to elude the mimetic mechanism because in this case the relation between *eidos* and *eidolon*, although truly based on a distinction (*diairesis*), is based more on collection (*synagoge*). The *eidola* of beauty do not simply derive from the *eidos* of beauty; they partake in it, as emerges in the following passage from the *Phaedo* too:

> If there is anything beautiful besides the Beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares in that Beautiful, and I say so with everything. [...] I no longer understand or recognize those other sophisticated causes, and if someone tells me that a thing is beautiful because it

> has a bright color or shape or any such thing, I ignore these other reasons – for all these confuse me – but I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of, or the sharing in,[77] or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful. That, I think, is the safest answer I can give myself or anyone else. And if I stick to this I think I shall never fall into error. This is the safe answer for me or anyone else to give, namely, that it is through Beauty that beautiful things are made beautiful. (*Phaed*. 100c–e)

This type of relation entertained by *eidola* of beauty with the *eidos* of beauty does not have the characteristics of *mimesis*, but can rather be named *methexis* (participation).

The *eidola* of beauty in their visibility also show their *eidos.* To explain the structure of this relation leads to one of the most delicate areas to explore within Platonic philosophy. In this regard, this work avoids venturing into an explanation based on a principle of causality,[78] primarily because, just to correctly set this type of analysis, it would be necessary both to analyse and articulate the entire Platonic theory of Ideas, and to define the status of empiric objects within Plato's philosophy.

To unpick the criticism of writing and orality in Plato, it suffices to refer to the mimetic mechanism and the visual model on which it depends. However, from the ontology intrinsic in the mimetic mechanism arise issues related to the visibility and understandability of the whole reality (both in its finitude and in its transcendence). As long as the analysis dwells in the realm of *mimesis*, among the *eidola* and their asymmetric resemblance, the ontology of this derivation/separation is easier to grasp. When it comes to reconnecting the *eidolon* to its source and to understanding the nature of this participation, the analysis gets more complicated. On the stable level of the *eide*, the main difficulty consists in understanding how these eternal and self-identical entities partake in the *eidola*.

77 The term used for this sharing is *koinonia*, which is semantically interchangeable with *methexis* (used in a verbal expression a few lines above) and *metalepsis*. Plato himself seems to use these terms in an equivalent way, meaning a general sense of participation of the *eidola* in the *eidos*. Cf. Fronterotta, 2001, p. 149.

78 For this type of analysis cf. Vlastos, 1969.

What is undeniable is the unique and exceptional nature of beauty, which is the only *eidos* visible itself in its *eidola*. This does not mean that the distance between the *eidos* and the *eidolon* is cancelled out in beauty – there is still a distinction between the multiple beautiful things and the "Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed."[79] The *eidos* and the *eidolon* are also clearly distinct in beauty and the philosopher is always about to remark on this distinction.[80]

Unlike a mimetic relation between *eidos* and *eidolon*, in beauty the reconnection between *eidolon* and *eidos* is made intuitively accessible with the sense of vision, almost aesthetically – in an etymological sense.

The vision of something or someone beautiful happens suddenly and rouses wonderment.[81] In the first instance, it is something completely reliant on sensorial experience: beauty relies on the *eidola*, which is to say that without the ephemeral impact of the *eidola* of beauty on the human senses, there would be no access to the *eidos* of beauty. Although this does not sound like the conventional reading of the Platonic theory of love, it is indeed what the *Symposium* shows throughout the dialogue and it is exemplified by the levels of the love-ladder that Diotima describes in the *Symposium*.[82] The first, inevitable step towards accessing the path that leads to *the great sea of Beauty*[83] is the love for one body – argues Diotima. In other words, it is the love for the embodiment of beauty: after and only after this wondrous impact of beauty does a human

79 Cf. *Symp*. 211d–e.

80 Cf. *Resp*. 476b–d.

81 Throughout the entire exchange between Diotima and Socrates, the priestess often warns him not to express an easy wonderment (*thaumasia*) for things which are quite logical, nor for simple truths. *Thaumasia* is a condition which originates from a sudden vision ("And the man who made Iris the child of Thaumas was perhaps no bad genealogist." *Theaet*. 155d) and it arouses both the desire to love and the desire to know (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b).
The moment when wonderment can be correctly aroused is all of a sudden, after a long course, in front of the vision of something beautiful: "the man who has been thus far guided in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labors" (*Symp*. 210e).

82 In the *Symposium*, another example of the relevance of the sensorial experience of beauty comes with a narrative event in the dialogue, and not through the exposition of a theory – the arrival of Alcibiades at the symposium. Alcibiades, famous for his beauty, arrives at Agathon's house drunk but still handsome. The description of his apparition is full of sensorial details: noises, colours, good smells, ornaments, plastic poses etc. Cf. *Symp*. 212c–213a.

83 *Symp*. 210d.

being want to step forward, as it is much more worthwhile to love beauty in its *eidos*[84] than multiple, equivalent *eidola* of beauty.[85]

The special status of beauty represents a turning point and an occasion both to make clear, once again, a determinant aspect of the ontology of the image in Plato, and to redefine the mimetic mechanism by a comparison with the *methexis*.

Concerning the ontology of the image, it should be even clearer now that the fact that the *eide* have a visible side – as *eidola* – and hence are graspable by human perception, does not make the *eidola* more real or less wrong in their essence, but rather makes them intelligible. What can be seen can also be known and, most of all, can be put under the surveillance of the philosophical judgement. This is a determinant and innovative aspect of Plato's philosophy, and it is the philosophical substratum in which the epistemological and ontological value we give to the image is still grounded today.

Concerning the mimetic mechanism, in comparison with the *methexis*, the main difference is determined by *eros*. If on one side, *mimesis* is a pure mechanism which reveals its functioning in a mirror, on the other side *methexis* is a generation.

To contextualise this comparison, it can be said that the best expression of the mimetic mechanism consists in the *eikastike mimesis*, that type of reproduction which respects the proportions (rigorously based on mathematics and geometry) of the articulation of the *eidos*. The Platonic *logos*, with its articulations, is a clear example of *eikastike mimesis*. With its complex integration of the *pseudos*, actualised in the *Sophist*, the *logos* represents a mediation between the triggering opposition of identity and difference in being.

The best expression of the *methexis* is indeed in the Platonic theory of love. Through an erotic relation and an erotic generation, it is possible to partake in that eternity that shines forth in some *eidola* as a promise of happiness[86] – that is mostly visible in the *eidola* of beauty. The manifestations of beauty have the power to kindle erotic desire in human beings, and the erotic madness drives the souls of human beings to the *eide* without the mediation of the *logos*, and hence without that weakness of the *logoi* that constantly serves as a reminder of human limitedness.

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84 *Symp*. 210b.

85 The central place given to Diotima's speech on love does not imply that Plato denies or diminishes the relevance of individuality in an erotic relation. On this point, Martha Nussbaum has elaborated a confutation of Gregory Vlastos' position, who claimed that Platonic love is a form of neglect of individuality and of affection. Cf. Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 166–173 and Vlastos, 1973, p. 31.

86 *Symp*. 205d, 208e.

These further evaluations of the *methexis* of beauty are not simply meant to show other aspects of the relation between *eidos* and *eidolon*. The model of the *methexis* clarifies, in a more complete way, the firm axiological rejection that Plato has towards most of the *eidola*. The *eidolon* is rejected not because it contains deception, but because it stands for the *eidos* and may aim to substitute it, as in the manipulative use of the sophists. The *eidolon* stands for the *eidos* not in a generative way, but in a lifeless way, rigid and mute like a double or a statue without a soul.

On these last points, it seems relevant to reconnect a theme left aside earlier, which is the petrifying power of the manipulated *logoi*. As discussed, sophistics does with the *logos* what the Gorgon does with a gaze: it turns a live body into stone.[87] The *eidolon* of beauty transcends the risk of *mimesis* as beauty is the spark of erotic desire. Erotic desire is the generative power that brings forth life in human production, giving birth to a newborn human life or even to *logoi*,[88] and in this way it allows human beings to partake in immortality. The manipulation of the *logoi* instead is the most dangerous outcome of the mimetic mechanism and leads to the annihilation of being, to relativism and to mortality – as seen with Gorgias.

The sophist plays with the *eidola* as if they are the (only) reality, as if the multiplicity and the finitude of the *eidola* are all that exists. For a sophist, behind the transient apparitions there is no sending back to a unifying and immobile *eidos*. According to this view, everything is a matter of perspective and interpretation: the *logoi* do not serve to reach the *eide*, but to build a variable account of a variable reality; also, the *logoi* are not weak at all – for the sophist, *logos* is an incredibly powerful seducer (a peculiar *eros*).[89] On this ridge of the realm of *mimesis*, human life is nothing; it is an *eidolon* itself, a bearer of mortality and finitude.

The philosopher, instead, suggests that every human being strives for immortality and the evidence for this relies on that strong passion that arises in her/him at the "methexic" view of beauty. On this basis, Plato grounds his

87 Cf. Vernant, 2011.

88 "[…] the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories (*logous*), in unstinting love of wisdom." (*Symp*. 210e).

89 "Inspired incantation through speeches (*logōn*) are inducers of pleasure and reducers of sorrow; by intercourse with the mind's belief the power of the incantation enchants and persuades and moves it by sorcery. Two arts of sorcery and magic have been invented. They are deceptions of mind and deviations of belief. How many have persuaded and do persuade, how many on how many subjects by fabricating false speech (*pseudes logos*)." (Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, 10–11).

theory of recollection and metempsychosis, which finds its best expression both in the myth of the winged horses and the charioteer in the *Phaedrus* and in the myth of Er in the *Republic*. Unfortunately, as anticipated, there is not enough space for a discussion of these themes in this work.

Coming back to the analogy of the stone in the *Symposium*, the lapsus (Gorgias/Gorgon) in the quotation from the *Odyssey*[90] should be considered an intentional Platonic allusion.

The association between the stone and the realm of death was codified in archaic culture and was made explicit by the ritual use of some types of statues. Death itself was considered a petrification of human beings.[91] To remain within the frame traced by the (modified) Homeric quote, the context of the original verse narrates Odysseus' descent into Hades (the realm of dead people). The verses recalled by Socrates tell of the moment when Ulysses runs away, scared by Persephone, the virgin abducted in the underworld by Hades (the homonymous king of his own realm), who married her and made her the queen of Hades. Persephone guards the entrance of Hades, holding in her hand the head of Medusa, the most terrifying of the three Gorgons, but also the only mortal of the three sisters – decapitated by Perseus after a cunning use of his shield as a mirror.[92] Persephone stands there to petrify, with the help of Medusa's gaze, any living person who might descend into Hades.

In the *Symposium*, the analogy of the stone recurs in different circumstances,[93] mainly referring to the incapability of entering into a relational dialectic. By definition, the stone is aporetic[94] and interestingly, some specific types of statues could stand as substitutes for the souls of dead persons, such as the

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90 *Symp*. 198c.

91 Cf. Vernant, 2006, p. 328.

92 The character of Perseus, his use of the mirror and the deadly petrification in the gaze of Medusa are part of one of the most emblematic and relevant episodes of Greek mythology. Unfortunately, this work does not provide an occasion to deepen the important philosophical implication of this myth within Plato's *Symposium*. This could easily be material for independent research.

93 Most emblematically when Alcibiades compares Socrates to a statue of a Silenus: "Look at him! Isn't he just like a statue of Silenus? You know the kind of statue I mean; you'll find them in any shop in town. It's a Silenus sitting, his flute or his pipes in his hands, and it's hollow. It's split right down the middle, and inside it's full of tiny statues of the gods. Now look at him again! Isn't he also just like the satyr Marsyas? Nobody, not even you, Socrates, can deny that you look like them. But the resemblance goes beyond appearance, as you're about to hear" (*Symp*. 215a–b). This passage is quite poignant and contains many symbolic philosophical elements which deserve independent research.

94 Without *poroi* (exits), from which the English term "pore(s)" is derived.

kolossoi.[95] The main characteristic of these statues is that, in archaic culture, they were not considered representative images, but real "doubles." Their existence was derived from an original (the soul of the dead person) but once created it was considered independent, having its own parallel existence. As argued, to consider the *eidola* fully existent and independent in their own existence was a specific trait of archaic culture, which also resembles the structure of the Parmenidean ontology: what exists, is, and it cannot be said that it does not exist. Hence, the *kolossoi* too exist as doubles of human beings, although they do not have movement or life, they simply have no soul – hence no way back to the *eide*.

Plato, to avert the possibility of the unanimated "double" and the risks of petrification (primarily the loss of *logos*, but also the impossibility of seeing), articulates an ontology of the image capable of integrating not-being as a relational aspect of being, and he does it with the only available tool, the *logoi*. This allows the *eidola* to exist but never independently; in fact, the human world is the realm of *mimesis* in which *eidos* and *eidolon* both exist but dialectically and never independently. The mission of the philosopher is to give an account of this dialectic, being merged in finitude and transcending it.

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95 Cf. the two studies by Jean-Pierre Vernant, one on the *kolossos* and the other on the theme of visual presentification, Vernant, 2006, pp. 321–349.

Conclusion

Throughout the chapters of this work, while bringing forward a discourse on *mimesis*, a methodological hypothesis has been indirectly advanced.

This overall hypothesis has been firstly introduced as the method adopted in this work to investigate the nature of the contradiction present in the conflict between orality and writing in Plato's oeuvre.[1] The method was to show the limitedness and partiality of those interpretations rooted in the contradiction and in the contrast; their limitedness was pointed out by contrast, by investigating passages and supporting arguments that emphasised the essential points of contact between the Platonic criticisms of orality and writing. As suspected, such method was prolific. In fact, as soon as the focus is taken away from the conflictual moment of this dialectic between orality and writing, it is possible to observe its wider movement of derivation and conciliation.

This work has extensively argued that the platonic critiques of orality and writing are different, yet integrative, aspects of a wider criticism, and this should explain why one aspect always refers to the other. Hence, this wider criticism does not occur in the opposition between orality and writing, but rather in their conciliation. The two criticisms are in fact two aspects of the more complex opposition between deceptive speeches (may these be oral or written) and true discourse (written in the soul).

This (meta)hermeneutic[2] comment at the final stage of the work serves to fully explicit that this methodological approach has not been a secondary aspect of the research, as it has thoroughly informed the contents discussed. In fact, notwithstanding its epistemological fragility (that of a mere methodological hypothesis), this method has been a strong pivot which allowed to delve progressively deeper into Platonic ontology: from a criticism of writing to a criticism of orality, from a criticism of literary devices to the criticism of the visual arts, from a criticism of *mimesis* to the full integration of the human experience within the realm of *mimesis*.

Delving deeper into Platonic ontology resonated better than other, more epistemologically supported methods (cf. the "Unwritten Doctrines Theory" or the "Platonic criticism of the arts"). The meaning of this resonance can be figuratively explained by visualising Plato's philosophy as an ontological web.[3]

1 Cf. introduction.

2 It could be argued that any form of hermeneutic is "meta". However, what is meant here is that this is a hermeneutic of a hermeneutic method.

3 Cf. section 3.3.

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Each major or minor platonic theme is a thread in the web, so that is almost impossible to touch one thread without moving the whole system; furthermore, each theme is vital to each other as it is supported by and supporting the others. This web-analogy may suggest two things.

Firstly, singling out individual themes, or individual dialogues does not pay justice to the whole web system and can possibly lead to manipulative interpretations; unless the methodological approach is merely philological, in that case the singling out can possibly work like a zooming lens that does not interfere with the whole system – but, even then, there are still doubts that singling out may be a correct approach.

Secondly, every work about Plato's philosophy is essentially partial and passible of all sorts of integrations. This partiality does not affect only those interpretative works which are biased by a predetermined approach, but any work, because it seems impossible to discuss a theme or more Platonic themes by including the whole web at all times. This does generate a sense of discomfort in most Platonic investigators who feel compelled to strengthen their arguments by seeking support in the Platonic texts, in the vast Platonic literature, in the whole history of philosophy – because this web has come to inform the whole western thought. As it is impossible to cover it all exhaustively, consolation can be found in explaining why many aspects have been involved and not deepened enough and why many other relevant aspects have been excluded. Methodological observations are statements for the freedom of choice imposed by that same weakness of the *logoi* that is the weakness of the human condition too – as argued above.[4]

These hermeneutic evaluations may not sound convincing enough for the expert Platonic interpreter. However, they can still be considered to understand, in other terms, what happened in this work from its beginning to its end.

This research started out motivated by a genuine interest for the Platonic criticism of the arts and its reception within history of aesthetics.[5] This thread showed many interconnections, including that with the orality/writing issue which seemed a promising field to explore. The orality/writing issue then grounded and guided the investigation towards the multi-connected and multi-layered thread of *mimesis* which at its core displayed the essential dialectic between *eidos* and *eidolon*, pointing eventually to the ontology of the image.

Indeed, the theme of *mimesis* has been the thread connecting the other themes dealt with in this work and leading to progressively more complex

4 Cf. sections 1.2, 3.4, 3.5.

5 Cf. premises.

and extensive questions. In the first chapter, *mimesis* has been considered mainly for its epistemological value: can we believe to words who stand alone on paper? Or do we believe in the spoken unwritten doctrines? In the second chapter, *mimesis* appears as a psychological, hence political, threat: is there space for artistic education in the city? Is it time to abandon oral mythology? And in the last chapter *mimesis* is unrooted and displayed in its ontological nature: how can there be deception without annihilating being? Can *eidola* be without fully substituting *eide*?

This whole course, with its many integrations and its incursions in different moments of the history of Contemporary Philosophy, revealed itself propaedeutic to a correct understanding of "Platonic aesthetics" which opened and closed this work, having undergone to a process of hermeneutic transformation. But this, as said, is just the propaedeutic work, the preliminary delimitation of a renovated and possibly convincing frame of reference within that same web.

As an effect of this transformation, arts gained a peripheral role in "Platonic aesthetics," while the theme of beauty has been placed at its core.

The theme of beauty is notoriously one of the most complex in Plato's work. Just quoting two examples: the *Hippias Major* ends by declaring "*chalepa ta kala*" (beautiful things are difficult);[6] furthermore, in the Cratylus, after defining *aischron* (ugliness) Socrates admits that it is even more difficult to define *kalon* (beauty).[7] But the complexity of beauty does not depend only on the difficulty of defining a concept (a difficulty that is peculiar to Plato's works),[8] but, once again, it rather depends on the complex ontological web in which beauty is collocated. In fact, beauty has both a material and ephemeral nature, and an ideal and eternal nature; these two natures are completely opposite in Plato's philosophy, but in the exceptional case of beauty they seem to coexist.

Beauty is in fact the most powerful event in Plato's works because it shines forth suddenly as any other *eidolon* would do, but through its perception, it is possible to be conducted directly to its eidetic source. Beauty always shows this double nature: appearance and absolute truth at the same time. This ability that beauty has to elevate human souls, makes it the most extraordinary event in Plato's dialogues.

By the end of this work, it seemed that *mimesis* had exhausted its mechanism when it came to beauty. In fact, beauty as that unique "event" that goes over the conflictual distinction between senses and intellect, *eidos* and *eidolon*,

6 *Hipp. Maj.* (304 e) Translated by Woodruff, ed. by Cooper, 1997.
7 *Crat.* 415 a–b.
8 Cf. Benson, 1990.

orality and writing, does not cancel out oppositions collapsing its *eidola* over its *eidos*, rather it breaks the seemingly predeterminate Platonic mimetic dualism. In fact, the occurrences of beauty in Plato's works exhibit a singular relation between *eidos* and *eidolon*, a relation that overcomes the mimetic mechanism and points to an *erotic* conception of life and philosophy as can be seen in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

These arguments have already been discussed and supported in this work; however, this conclusion offers the opportunity to link them back to the analogy of the statue/stone analysed at the end of the third chapter. As said, statues, archaic exempla of *eidola*, cannot be self-standing ontological beings: they cannot aim to stand for and substitute the *eide* as the stone lacks sound, view, warmth, resource and, most of all, beauty.

The lack of beauty of the stone is not due to a lack of aesthetic properties by the statues. It has to do with the material and substitutive nature of the stone itself. The stone cannot be beautiful because in the Platonic system beauty is defined by *eros* and not vice versa.[9]

From our contemporary perspective, this relation is reversed and aesthetics is perceived as a series of qualities that define beauty and beauty normally defines eros. This is one of the reasons why it is still partial to talk about "Platonic aesthetics" as something related to arts and image-making. If there is something like a "Platonic aesthetics" at all, this is related to *eros* and beauty and not to artmaking. It is related to *methexis* and not to *mimesis*. Although limited to a realm of *mimesis*, human beings, thanks to the liveliness of their souls, can see beauty and consequently they can experience *eros* as a desire and a generative power to bring forth life over human finitude.

These final reflections on the theme of *eros* in connection with aesthetics, beauty and the immortality of the soul are not exhaustive and, as noted earlier, they represent an open-ended conclusion which, in virtue of its openness, can serve as a starting point for further enquiries into the liminal territory of "Platonic aesthetics." A correct and complete understanding of beauty in Plato should also consider the theory of metempsychosis and the role of *anamnesis* in the process of knowledge.[10] In this work, these themes have not found adequate space. The main reason for the exclusion of these themes is due to the necessity of restraining the field of research to the precise Platonic opposition (orality/writing) which, rather than being a side aspect, has been revealed

9 Carchia, 2003, p. 136.

10 Daniele Guastini convincingly holds that *eros* and *anamnesis* have a substantial connection and a determinant role in the Platonic theory of knowledge. Cf. Guastini, 2003, pp. 52–61.

to be a preliminary and foundational aspect on which to set a possible theory of "Platonic aesthetics." To analyse this specific Platonic opposition, it has been relevant to include many aspects of contemporary interpretation, and this has led to the exclusion of many exquisitely Platonic aspects, whose relevance was not meant to be denied.

It is still worth recalling, as a conclusive note, the power of the wonderment aroused by the *eidola* of beauty in the soul. The wonderment provoked by the view of something or someone beautiful reconnects the soul with the *eidos* of beauty itself. For a brief, but powerful moment, the soul is brought back to its undefinable past in the *hyperuranion* and through a process of *anamnesis* it remembers the *eide*, specifically, the *eidos* of beauty:

> This is the best and noblest of all the forms that possession by god can take for anyone who has it or is connected to it, and when someone who loves beautiful boys is touched by this madness he is called a lover. As I said, nature requires that the soul of every human being has seen reality; otherwise, no soul could have entered this sort of living thing. But not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here—not souls that got only a brief glance at the reality there, not souls who had such bad luck when they fell down here that they were twisted by bad company into lives of injustice so that they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before. Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there. Then they are beside themselves, and their experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing. (*Phaedr*. 249e–250a)

The shining forth of beauty is able to reconcile the best human souls.

AFTERWORD

On the Contemporary Relatability of This Study

This work, although it focuses on specific themes of Ancient Philosophy, does not intend to be a purely autoreferential academic exercise. The desire to investigate these aspects of Platonic thought originated – as mentioned – from some interests in aesthetics; nevertheless, the research has been nurtured also by an authentic desire to challenge, philosophically, the understanding of some of the most influential traits of contemporary communication and the perception of the image nowadays.

This work can offer a philosophical application to the understanding of some of the most popular contemporary phenomena which puzzle our inherited sense of self as individuals and also as a species. To explain this in generic terms, it is arguable that focusing on the implication of the ancient issue of orality/writing could help us to live our present with more awareness. We live in an age of mediatic transition as much as Plato did in his own time. The transition that we are experiencing is from literate communication to telematic communication. The implications of this contemporary shift are wider and more complex compared to those that occurred through the shift from orality to literacy,[1] which Plato witnessed with his own work.

In this work, the analysis of relevant contemporary themes has not found an adequate frame; nevertheless, this study can serve as a theoretical tool to frame the philosophical ground on which these themes should be correctly discussed and analysed – with the wish of having further occasions to develop these investigations.

To offer just a few examples of the relevance of this study for interpreting some puzzling issues of our times, it could be mentioned two of the most relatable contemporary phenomena.

The first is the phenomenon of "fake news."[2] The web represents a sort of unmaterial, although visual, mirrored world of the real world. On the internet,

1 As Walter Ong noted more than thirty years ago: "Most persons are surprised, and many distressed, to learn that essentially the same objections commonly urged today against computers were urged by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (274–7) and in the *Seventh Letter* against writing. Writing, as Socrates says in the *Phaedrus*, is inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind. It is a thing, a manufactured product. The same of course is said of computers" (Ong, 1982, p. 80).

2 "Manipulation, disinformation, falseness, rumors, conspiracy theories—actions and behaviors which are frequently associated with the term [fake news]—have existed as long as

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there are channels for the exhibition and exchange of information of any sort, such as websites and social media. The validation of what is written on websites and exchanged on social media is based on the simple "presentification" of such information. The fact that the information is present (visible) seems enough to consider it real. The visibility of the information and of pictures (it has been argued in this work how they can both be manipulated and deceptive) on the web alters the perception of truth by cancelling out the distinction of different degrees of truth: everything is equally true hence everything is equally (un)questionable. Moving an entire world to the visual level makes the distinction between *eidos* and *eidolon* almost impossible to see. As argued at different stages in this work, the major risk of confusing an *eidolon* with its *eidos* is the annihilation of truth, as the manipulative use of *logoi* by the sophists achieves. By considering this, the parallel and co-dependent contemporary phenomena of "fake news" and "conspiracy theories" can be better understood.[3]

In more exemplative terms, it can be considered how anti-vaccine narratives which question and discard scientific data, went global (even viral in some contexts) during COVID-19 pandemic. Scientific data and pseudoscientific accounts, motivated by different manipulative intents,[4] when posted on social or virtual media *appear* equally valid in the "post-truth world."[5] If this is possible it is also in virtue of a problem – dealt with in this study – which is implicit in the relation between *eidos* and *eidolon* and has been pointed to by Plato as a risk factor. This problem concerns the issue of responsibility.[6] What appears on a screen is unresponsive; it means that it cannot speak, but also

humans have communicated. The novelty of the term in this context relates to how false or misleading information is produced, distributed and consumed through digital communication technology." (Kalsnes, 2018, p. 2).

3 This discussion is not trying to establish a direct causal relation between "fake news," "conspiracy theories" and the visual nature of the web. However, the structure of the ontology of the image is one of the factors – frequently underestimated – which increases this type of epistemological dystopia. For a complete analysis of these themes cf. Seneviratne, 2020.

4 Cf. the recent monitoring completed by BBC regarding the promotion of anti-vaccine narratives by a social media network and the manipulative use of misinformation https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c202gf9v

5 "Scepticism about common-sense things has been on the agenda of philosophers for centuries, but only as a plaything confined to the study. It does not spill into everyday life. So, what on earth do people mean when they say we are living in a 'post-truth' world?" (Blackburn, 18/02/2019).

6 "Now in an age of global internet connectivity, social media offers impressionable teenagers and innumerable troll factories an unprecedented opportunity for mischief and immunity to its consequences. As a result, we begin to live in a world in which more and more people are untrustworthy more of the time." (Ibid.).

that it is not responsible for what it stands for.[7] This phenomenon is so dangerous on an epistemological and ethical level that, on the verge of this mediatic transition, a group of well-known intellectuals and scientists gathered together to found a research group in Italy with the intent to contrast the phenomenon of pseudoscientific mediatic communication.[8] Their criticism and activism recall in some ways the criticism that Plato developed against both writing and orality. Even some of the contradictions are quite similar to Plato's own contradiction. In fact, these intellectuals criticise some uses of the tool that they themselves use to express their criticism (web and media).

The other example is related to a relatively recent scientific event that had a worldwide echo: "A global team of astronomers, led by Harvard scientists, has for the first time captured an image of a black hole."[9]

*Sagittarius A** is the scientific name for the black hole at the centre of the Milky Way galaxy and, to be precise, the picture taken shows its horizon of event. In fact, a black hole is notoriously invisible, but before considering other scientific explanations, a philosophical question arises: how is it possible to take a visible picture of something invisible? This is an original philosophical question comparable only to the Platonic question of how it would be possible to see one's own source of the view (hence, the pupil of the eye). Plato's answer was:

> I'm sure you've noticed that when a man looks into an eye his face appears in it, like in a mirror. We call this the "pupil," for it's a sort of miniature of the man who's looking. […] Then an eye will see itself if it observes an eye and looks at the best part of it, the part with which it can see. […] But it won't see itself if it looks at anything else in a man, or anything else at all, unless it's similar to the eye. […] So if an eye is to see itself, it must look at an eye, and at that region of it in which the good activity of an eye actually occurs, and this, I presume, is seeing. (*Alc. I* 133a–b)[10]

7 "For years, Zuckerberg has insisted that Facebook is a technology company, not a media company with all the editorial responsibilities it entails. But eventually, he admitted in December 2016 that Facebook had a greater responsibility to the public than just being a tech company." (Kalsnes, 2018, p. 12).

8 This group was founded first in 1989 under the acronym CICAP – *Comitato Italiano per il Controllo delle Affermazioni sulle Pseudoscienze* (*Italian Committee for the Investigation of Claims on the Pseudoscience*) with the intent of contrasting the divulgation of distorted information on paranormal episodes. Since 2013 the group has focused mainly on the wrong claims of pseudoscience. Its main intent is to verify the sources and the scientific validity of some pseudoscientific claims. Cf. https://www.cicap.org/n/index.php.

9 Reuell, 10/04/2019.

10 Translated by Hutchinson, ed. by Cooper, 1997.

The scientific answer about taking a picture of a black hole is pretty much the same:

> But the only way to detect black holes, Doeleman said, was through VLBI, or very long baseline interferometry. The process involves collecting data from multiple radio telescopes around the globe, then using algorithms and supercomputers to analyze that data, effectively creating a "virtual telescope" the size of the Earth itself, turning the planet into a giant radio telescope.[11]

A telescope, in fact, works like the pupil of a human eye, reflecting and mirroring. By turning the planet into a big enough eye, it was possible to obtain this paradoxical image. However, the black hole itself remains invisible, and what the many radio telescopes could picture is just photons:

> Doeleman and his colleagues were hoping the giant flashlight would reveal a ring of light known as the last photon orbit. The closest light can get to a black hole without being "eaten," that orbit is the result of photons being flung off from the super-heated material around the black hole. Some of those photons are redirected by the extreme gravity and come to Earth, where they could be detected by EHT researchers.[12]

The fact that technology and science have somehow allowed us to "see the unseeable" should not lead us to believe that that picture is actually *Sagittarius A**. Indeed, that picture represents – without denying at all its success and the utmost enthusiasm which derived from it – the perfect example of what Plato meant with by *eidola*: a collection of perspectives of a thing and not the thing itself.

Despite their technical perfectibility, human *logoi* remain weak. This does not mean that we should give up our human research; on the contrary, to keep on examining is the entire point of a human life,[13] and it rather means that human research should not stop because no *eidolon* can ever be exhaustive enough to satisfy the authentic desire of human knowledge. We do live in the

11 Reuell, 10/04/2019.

12 Ibid.

13 "On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less." (*Apol.* 38a) Translated by Grube, ed. by Cooper 1997.

realm of *mimesis* and our visibility can keep the eye stable only on the *eidola*, while *eide* can be grasped only temporarily. It is a matter of finitude. The most dangerous mistake would be to confuse an *eidolon* with its *eidos*, because this would disclose the realm of death and annihilate the incessant life of the *eide*. To protect not only our knowledge, but also the creative power of our soul, we should train in the art of distinction and carefully apply it to the visual which, willingly or not, is the territory in which human knowledge and human relations have progressively grounded themselves.

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General Index

Index Locorum